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What's Seneca to Him?
Senecan Shakespeare

edited by
Silvia Bigliuzzi



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Introduction

Silvia Bigliazzi

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

(Belsey 1973, 85)

Confluences

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Constructing Authors

Our starting point is the invention of the English Seneca in 1581 and of Shakespeare-the-author-for-playreaders in 1623. As Stephen Orgel has remarked, "[f]or the Renaissance, classical drama was literature and was taught in school, though Terence was also performed, and was a model for Latin as a living, spoken language, hence somewhere between literature and life" (2015, 64). Seneca too was played in Latin since 1540s and in English apparently once in 1559-1560, at Cambridge, where Neville's translation of *Oedipus*, first published three years later, was produced. Studley's *Agamemnon* was probably staged in 1566 in an unknown venue². The first English translations of Seneca began in 1559, with Heywood's *Troas*, but the ten tragedies were collected only in 1581 by Thomas Newton, who added one translation of his own doing (*Thebais*) to the seven already published in smaller formats (by Heywood, Neville, Studley, and Nuce), to which he also added two more prepared by Studley (*Hippolytus* and *Hercules Oetaeus*). Through those books, and the final canonisation of Seneca as a dramatist who was to be read for his grave and virtuous sayings, despite being a pagan, Newton also gave instructions on how to read plays following Seneca's own teaching: not in fragments, by singling out sentences and individual passages – which, however, enriched the message – but by reading the entire book. English readers of vernacular texts thus became acquainted not only with strange parts of drama, such as the chorus, but also with a way of reading that privileged, as Lyons underlines, "character and plot as integral to exegesis" (34). In "On Discursive Reading", Seneca himself in-

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

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

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

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

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

As Orgel further reminds us, *the* tragedy par excellence in Renaissance England, when “revenge was the originary subject of drama” (53), was not *Oedipus*, but *Thyestes*, a play featuring an inventively gruesome killing of children. Compared to Seneca, Greek tragedy is more concerned with the killing of parents, as in the cases of Oedipus, Electra, and Orestes. But in Seneca, the action often climaxes with the death of children. This happens in plays like *Hercules Furens*, *Medea*, and *Thyestes*, and this is also the case with *Phaedra* and the *Trojan Woman*, where Hippolytus, Astyanax and Polyxena are also sons and daughters who are killed for revenge or sacrificed (Braden 1985, 249; Patrick Gray “Seneca Improved: Shakespeare’s Medieval Optimism”, 137). Braden makes the same point with regard to Macbeth’s killing of Macduff’s children (1984, 291), and in this issue Patrick Gray mentions Cordelia, Ophelia, and Desdemona as figures of blameless young women who die for no fault of their own, symbols of suffering innocence (137ff.). In *Titus Andronicus*, sons and daughters also die, and no one, says Orgel, “argues against revenge except Tamora, who is obviously disingenuous” (62). It may be recalled that in the years when revenge tragedy was taking shape in England, judicial punishment was not yet entirely distinct from extra-judicial forms, and that in any case the topic was still controversial, suggesting a degree of continuity between “wild justice”, in Bacon’s terms³, and “justice” (Callaghan and Kyle 2007, 54). More recently, Woodbridge has emphasised that a certain distrust of justice at the time favoured private vengeance as a response to the failings or perversions of the court system, and that drama, in turn, replicated this by exploring four main possibilities: unacknowledged merit, undeserved rewards, unpunished crimes, and unjust punishments. *Titus Andronicus* fulfils all four conditions, but it

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

problematizes the Senecan model, hyper-Senecally building an escalation of revenge on a stratified series of classical patterns of female violence (subjects and objects alike), calling into question gender and power relations⁴. And yet, that Senecan model remains the matrix of Elizabethan, and Shakespearean, revenge tragedy. The Latin Seneca, as the Seneca of Jasper Heywood and the other translators, lies at the origin of the genre as well as of ideas of “declamatory Seneca”. Beyond modern performative domestications – the articles in this issue claim – he remains audible across Shakespeare’s entire career.

Dissonant Polyphonies

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

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

sense, the Hamletic sceptical variations on Senecan revenge, also mentioned by Miola, “place him on a higher ontological level” in ways that witness Shakespeare’s dialectical engagement with Seneca from *Richard III* to *Hamlet*, not his jettisoning Seneca, even when Senecan revengers are made to appear comparatively archaic (Goy Blanquet 89; see also Perry 2021, 81, 87-8). Hamlet is “haunted by a whole range of classical actions and modes of speech that threaten to absorb him”, Burrow remarks (2013, 175), but it is precisely his not being absorbed that allows him to challenge those models while retaining the mood. Miola’s article shows how this occurs textually by moving from parallel loci indicating possibilities to “inherited topoi and reformulated conventions, clusters of rhetorical and thematic ideas and larger patterns of concatenation and configuration”, as in the case of the *domina-nutrix* or *satelles* pairs⁵. From an analysis of anagrammatic wordplay, as in the *amnes* (rivers), *amens* (mad), *manes* (shade) verbal alchemy of Demetrius’ *Per Stigia, per manes vehor* (“through Stigian regions, through shades I am borne”, II.1.35) that modifies Phaedra’s *Styga, per amnes igneos amens sequar* (“Through Styx, through rivers of fire I shall madly follow”, 1180), to a close discussion of more extended passages, Miola examines a whole range of subtle transformations of language, styles, and devices, including the typically Senecan *Schreirede*: the “heightened speech whereby the character (or the chorister) deflects his glance from his own person and frantically looks for sympathy in the presumptively sympathetic universe” (Rosenmeyer 1989, qtd 100). Thus, by way of verbal alteration and the imitation of models and conventions, Shakespeare appeals to classical *auctoritas*, and re-shapes Senecan fragments, moments of speech and forms to express new meanings.

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

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

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

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

Praetexta

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

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

Expansions

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

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

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

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

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

Coda

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

8 See Bigliuzzi and Suthren (forthcoming).

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Shakespeare and the English Seneca in Print: Collections, Authorship, Collaboration, and Pedagogies of Play-Reading

Tara L. Lyons

Despite the abundance of scholarship debating Seneca's influence on Shakespeare, there is no corresponding research on how Seneca's print transmission informed Shakespeare's books in print. This essay begins to address this critical gap by turning to two of the earliest multi-play collections printed in England that were devoted exclusively to English plays: *Seneca His Tenne Tragedies* (1581) and Shakespeare's First Folio (1623). Of these two collections, Shakespeare's has received far more critical attention *as a book*, but when the volumes are juxtaposed, their affinities are striking. Both play collections share a number of analogous organizational, paratextual, and typographic features that helped coalesce the authorial identities of an "English Seneca" and an original "Shakespeare", respectively. Both collections bear the traces of their producers' negotiations over the authenticity of the collected texts, the extent of their collaborative production, and the lessons they claimed to teach to early modern English readers. Although the *Tenne Tragedies* was not a direct bibliographical source for the First Folio, the English Seneca collection may have paved the way for the invention of Shakespeare as "Author" and the consumption of his now-famous First Folio.

Keywords: Elizabethan translations, Book history, Authorship, Play reading, Paratexts

In 1581, the London Stationer Thomas Marsh made literary history when he printed ten dramatic texts in a collected edition entitled *Seneca His Tenne Tragedies* (hereafter called the *Tenne Tragedies*). Upon publication, this quarto volume became the first multi-text collection devoted exclusively to plays in English and the first complete edition of Seneca's trag-

edies printed on English soil¹. The 1581 collection brought together three yet unpublished translations and reprinted seven more that had been rendered into English and then individually printed in London between 1559 to 1566. These seven formerly published translations included Jasper Heywood's *Troas* (1559, [1562?]), *Thyestes* (1560), *Hercules Furens* (1561); Alexander Neville's *Oedipus* (1563); John Studley's *Medea* (1566b) and *Agamemnon* (1566a); and Thomas Nuce's *Octavia* [1566]². When Marsh published the *Tenne Tragedies*, he collaborated with Thomas Newton, a Church of England clergyman, schoolteacher, translator, and poet who served as editor and brought the English tragedies into relative textual uniformity³. By preparing one translation by himself (*Thebais*) and acquiring two more by Studley (*Hippolytus* and *Hercules Oetaeus*), Newton completed the ten-play collection and dedicated the whole volume to the recently knighted courtier, Sir Thomas Heneage⁴. The *Tenne Tragedies* provided a table of the translators' names and their contributions to the volume, but the title page advertised that "SENECA" was the unifying principle of collection and the ten Englished tragedies were still very much "HIS"⁵.

1 See Farmer and Lesser's *DEEP* for a comprehensive list of English drama in printed collections through 1660. Also see Greg 1970, for the bibliography of "Collections" in III:1009-1138. I emphasize "multi-text" editions to exclude earlier two-part editions, such as Henry Medwall's *1&2 Fulgens and Lucrece* (1512-16), *1&2 Gentleness and Nobility* [c. 1525], *1&2 Nature* [1530-34?], and *1&2 Promos and Cassandra* (1578). The mixed-genre collections that contained drama in English before 1581 were *A Merry Jest of Robin Hood and of His Life* [1560?]; *All Such Treatises* (1570); George Gascoigne's *A Hundred Sundry Flowers* (1573) and *Posies* (1575); and *The First Part of Churchyard's Chips* (1575, 1578).

2 For more on the biographies of the translators, see Winston 2016, 152-70; Norland 2009, 46-68.

3 This was not Newton's first collaboration with Marsh. See Braden 2004. I attribute editorial decisions to Thomas Newton; however, as the volume's publisher and printer, Thomas Marsh had significant control over the collection's bibliographical presentation.

4 All of the translations published between 1559-1566 were dedicated to Elizabeth's privy counselors with the exception of Heywood's *Troas*, which was dedicated to the queen herself.

5 The decorative border on the title page included Marsh's initials (TM) in a cypher. The border was used on a number of other books printed by Marsh, including another work published that same year, Edmund Campion's *The grat bragge and challenge* (1581).

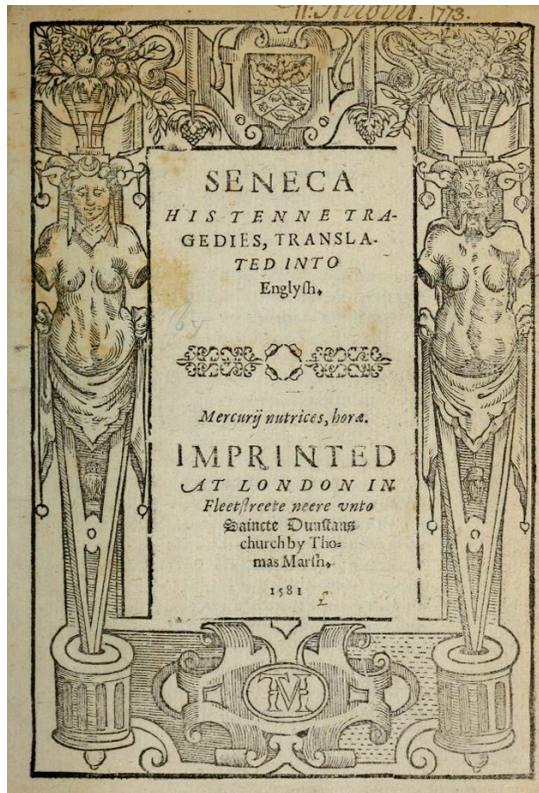


Fig. 1 Title Page of *Seneca His Tenne Tragedies* (1581), sig. A2^r.
Boston Public Library, RARE BKS G.4073.7.

Not until 1623 would another collected edition containing more than a handful of English plays materialize in print⁶. This collection was *Mr William Shakespeares Comedies, Histories, & Tragedies*, now commonly known as the First Folio.

6 Two other collections containing solely plays and printed between 1581 and 1623 were published by Edward Blount, who was part of the First Folio syndicate. Sir William Alexander's *Monarchick Tragedies* (1604) contained *The Tragedy of Croesus* and *The Tragedy of Darius* under a general title page. In 1616, two more of Alexander's tragedies and his poems were added to the collection. More common were these mixed-genre collections, such as Ben Jonson's *Works* (1616) with nine plays, 133 epigrams, fifteen poems, six entertainments, and thirteen masques. Daniel's *Cleopatra* was the sole play among his verses in the 1594, 1595, 1598, 1599, and 1601 collections, while *Philotas* joined the expanded volumes in 1605, 1607, 1611, and 1623.

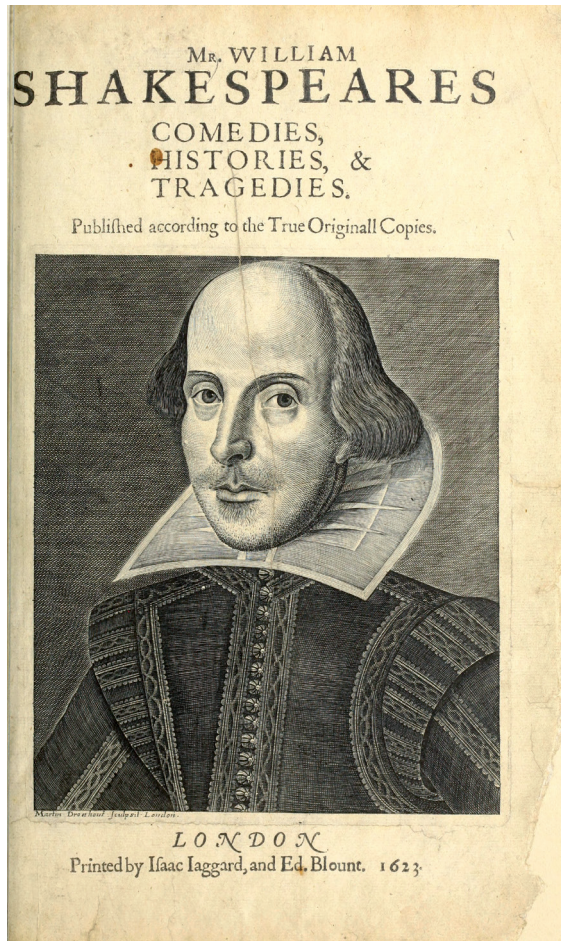


Fig. 2 Title Page of Shakespeare's *Comedies, Histories, & Tragedies* (1623).
Boston Public Library, RARE BKS G.174.1 FOLIO.

This volume was manufactured in London by a publishing syndicate led by the Stationers Edward Blount and Isaac Iaggard⁷. For the Folio, thirty-six playtexts were assembled by Shakespeare's fellow actors from the London theaters, John Heminge and Henry Condell, who sought to build a textual monument in memory of their dear friend Shakespeare. Heminge and Condell composed two prefatory epistles for the volume. The first was dedicated to William Herbert and his

⁷ For a new well-researched study of the publishing syndicate, see Higgins 2022.

brother Philip, the third and fourth Earls of Pembroke, respectively, and the second was addressed “To the great Variety of Readers” (sigs. pA2^r-A3^r). Additional preliminaries consisted of a “Catalogue” or table of contents that divided the thirty-six play titles into three dramatic genres (comedies, histories, and tragedies) and identified the page number where each play began (sig. pA5+1^r). A second table listing the “Names of the Principall Actors in all these Plays” (pA5+2^r) was added to the preliminaries alongside commendatory verses by Ben Jonson, Leonard Digges, Hugh Holland, and “J.M”, probably James Mabbe (sig. p4^r-A6r+1). Like the *Tenne Tragedies*, the First Folio was teeming with English agents who helped authorize and validate the plays here classified as “SHAKESPEARES”⁸.

As the earliest printed collections to present English readers with a half-a-score or more of English plays, the *Tenne Tragedies* (1581) and the First Folio (1623) share important affinities that have been overlooked by scholars. Before these collections were published, select plays by each author had been performed in England in varied arrangements, and some had been printed and/or reprinted in different forms by various Stationers⁹. To produce the Seneca and Shakespeare collections, editors and publishers had to consolidate a disordered array of unpublished manuscripts and printed editions that had been produced over time in a variety of theatrical, literary, and material contexts. Far more than a single playbook, a large volume of heterogeneous plays demanded substantial editorial and press labor to create the look of a uniform bibliographical product. To unify contents and help English readers navigate the whole multi-play collections of Seneca and Shakespeare, editors and publishers utilized paratexts and typographical designs. From this perspective, it is easy to see why bibliographers of English drama have readily classified the *Tenne Tragedies* and the First Folio as similar kinds of “Collections”, as they shared similar processes of production and delivered in one

8 As Massai (2012, 7) has argued, the First Folio “required a combination of authorizing strategies associated with Shakespeare’s company, his stationers, and his patrons”. Similar arguments can be found in Latouris 2015, 57-58.

9 In England, Seneca’s tragedies were performed in Latin in educational institutions beginning in the 1540s, and in English translation by 1559 when Neville’s *Oedipus* was likely staged in Trinity College Cambridge. See Pollard 2017, 282-83. On editions of Seneca’s tragedies, see Pollard 2017, 278-285.

volume a posthumous author's dramatic oeuvre (Farmer and Lesser; Greg 1970, V, 1105-7).

Nevertheless, from the perspective of scholars of Renaissance drama, the commonalities between the two collections have gone unnoticed. This is partly because the authors and their plays derived from different English dramatic traditions. As is commonly known, Shakespeare was a professional playwright from the 1580s to his death in 1616. His plays were written for and performed by London theater companies and consumed by thousands of spectators in the theaters. Shakespeare's playbooks were printed in various quarto editions, some of which appeared without his name on the title page. By contrast, Seneca's tragedies were academic drama and were read more often than they were performed. When the tragedies were staged in Latin or in translation, their performances took place at English schools, inns of court, and universities. It is from these pedagogical contexts that the English Seneca translations emerged and then found their way into print. Of course, Seneca had a more extensive history in the continental book trade, with dozens of complete editions of the Latin tragedies printed from as early as 1498. Publications of the ten tragedies in vernacular languages appeared later, such as the French edition in 1534, the Italian edition in 1560, and English edition in 1581 (Smith 1967, 49-74)¹⁰. High cultural and commercial value was associated with these collected editions of Seneca and other classical dramatists, whereas the publishers of English playwrights such as Shakespeare had to manufacture such value through the bibliographical presentation of the author's collected plays (Robinson 2002, 361-64).

Rather than focus on the analogous bibliographical features of these collections, scholars of English drama have instead theorized the influence of Seneca and the ten English translations on Shakespeare's dramatic compositions¹¹. Over the past hundred years,

10 Pierre Grosnet's *Les tragedies* (Paris, 1534); Lodovico Dolce's *Le tragedie* (Venice, 1560).

11 Robinson likewise argues that emphasis on the Jonson and Shakespeare collections "has distorted our sense of the history of dramatic publication by obscuring our recognition of the difficulties that impeded the publishing of plays in collection, and by limiting our sense of the literary collection as the locus of cultural contests" (2002, 362).

scholars have hotly debated whether Shakespeare read the English Seneca translations or borrowed from them – lightly, heavily, or not at all (Cunliffe 1925, 1-12; Spearing 1912, 1963; O’Keefe 1980, 90-98; Norland 2009, 46-68; Woodbridge 2010, 131-61)¹². If scholars believed that the *Tenne Tragedies* was an important source for Shakespeare’s plays, the “English Seneca” was characterized as a momentous edition, or as B. R. Reese called it, the “midwife assisting at the birth of English drama” (Rees 1969, 133). Scholars who were skeptical of the influence of the English translations on Shakespeare, such as G. K. Hunter, were more likely to dismiss the *Tenne Tragedies* as a pitiful example of dramatic poetry with only “supposed historical significance” (Hunter 1974, 194)¹³. Over the past twenty years, new scholarship on the Seneca translations as cultural and literary productions in their own right has gained traction, but such analysis has engaged with the texts of the translations rather than the books that were their vehicles in print¹⁴. There is another discernible reason why the *Tenne Tragedies* and the First Folio have not been analyzed as collected counterparts. The First Folio has been called the “most-studied book in the world” (Smith 2016). The *Tenne Tragedies*, by contrast, often goes unmentioned in studies of drama collection, and when it does arise in discussions, it is characterized as a distant precursor to Shakespeare’s Folio¹⁵. Within these critical contexts, the *Tenne Tragedies*’ bibliographical proximity to the First Folio remains undiscovered country.

This article recognizes the *Tenne Tragedies* as an imperative forerunner to Shakespeare’s First Folio. As I demonstrate below, the paratextual and typographical apparatuses used to construct the “English Seneca” in 1581 were essential to crafting the authorial identity of

12 The term “English Seneca” dates to 1589 when it appeared in a preface for Thomas Nashe, but it was not used by Newton or the translators in their publications.

13 G. K. Hunter complained about the twentieth-century reissues of the 1581 collection and questioned the volume’s historical significance.

14 Two exceptions are Ker and Winston (2012) and Mayne (2019). For recent scholarship on the translations, see Bigliuzzi 2021, 139-65; Norland 2009, 46-68; Stapleton 2006, 100-33; Steenbergh 2017, 690-706; Pincomb 2012, 531-46; Valls-Russell 2020, 25-43; Winston 2016, 152-70; Woodbridge 2010, 131-61.

15 See Howard-Hill 1990, 129-38, on how the print presentation of classical drama influenced that of English printed plays.

“Shakespeare” in 1623. Despite approaching dramatic authorship in different ways, both volumes’ producers highlighted the interventions of a great many English agents – such as translators, editors, stationers, poets, dedicatees, and readers. In effect, Thomas Newton and Thomas Marsh’s *Tenne Tragedies* constructed a collection that was more than a compilation of translated tragedies; it was also designed to represent its various contributors as a community of pedagogically minded Englishmen who would assist novice readers on their journeys through the tragedies of Seneca, an ancient non-Christian author. In a similar way, the First Folio illuminated the contributions of a diverse range of figures from literary London and the English theaters who through paratexts were fashioned as friendly interlocutors between English readers and this mass of playtexts gathered under Shakespeare’s name. With their help, English readers would find meaning in Shakespeare and his plays. On one hand, this article’s juxtaposition of the 1581 and 1623 collections seeks to defamiliarize the First Folio, to reimagine how, if produced at a different time or under different conditions, this canonical collection may have looked and functioned more like the *Tenne Tragedies*. On the other hand, this analysis also considers to what extent that First Folio is indebted to the English Seneca. No evidence indicates that Blount and Jaggard modeled Shakespeare’s collection on the *Tenne Tragedies*, but the Seneca edition as a collection of English plays seems to have performed the pedagogical and cultural work that made the publication of the First Folio possible.

Authorship

When editing the *Tenne Tragedies*, Newton must have been familiar with scholarly debates over Seneca’s identity and critics’ doubts about his authorship of the ten tragedies. Research today confirms that Seneca the Younger (son of the historian and rhetorician, Seneca the Elder) was Nero’s tutor, Stoic philosopher, and dramatist, and thus the author of the prose works, declamations, and the ten tragedies. Since at least the fourteenth century, however, scholars questioned whether the “Seneca” mentioned in early manuscripts referred to one man, a “single super-Seneca”, as Stephen Hinds calls him, or two (or more) different Senecas (Hinds 2004, 162; cited in Ker 2008,

198)¹⁶. Complicating the matter was further confusion about Seneca the dramatist and Seneca the philosopher, and whether they were different people or the same (Mayer 1994, 157-74). Concerns about the tragedies' attribution also arose, as scholars wondered how Seneca could have written *Octavia*, a play that prophesies his own death (Boyle 2008, xiii-xiv). In 1581, the *Tenne Tragedies* glossed over these concerns, as Newton seamlessly conflated the tragedian and the moral philosopher and seemingly saw no reason to introduce questions about the texts' authorship. "Seneca" had functioned for centuries as the unifying thread for these ten tragedies, and Newton and Marsh offered their readers this same canon of ten.

What was authentically Seneca's, however, was a concern presented in the 1581 collection, and it was linked to the volume's construction of its "Author" and his intentions. For example, in his "To the Reader" prefacing *Troas* and reprinted from the 1559 edition, Heywood begs the readers to be gentle with his translation and "consider how hard a thing it is for mee to touch at ful in all poynts the authors mynd, (being in many place veye harde and doubtfull, and the worke much corrupt by the default of euill printed Bookes)" (sig. O1^v, 95^v). *Troas*, Heywood noted, was "in some places vnperfite, whether left so of the Author, or parte of it loste, as tyme deuoureth all things". Translating Seneca required Heywood to engage in textual editing by identifying where errors in the text occurred and questioning how they were introduced into the work. Whether the lacunae were the faults of the "euill" press, "left" by Seneca himself, or subjected to material degradation, these cruxes prompted Heywood to supply "the wante of some thynges", and "to expounde" the texts without neglecting to observe "their sence". In his preface to *Thebais*, Newton likewise admits to struggling to translate an incomplete source text, although he acknowledges that "this Tragedy, was left by the Author unperfect, because it neyther hath in it, Chorus, ne yet the fifth Acte" (sig. F8^v, 40^v). Translating a fragmented text, nonetheless, provided Newton with the opportunity to demonstrate his dedication to

16 On the two Senecas, see Ker 2008, 197-203; Kohn 2003, 271-80; Mayer 1994, 151-74. The attribution of *Octavia* was rejected by Lipsius while Heinsius rejected Seneca's authorship of *Hercules Oetaeus*. Currently, both tragedies are no longer considered Seneca's although they are treated as parts of his textual canon.

the Senecan project. *Thebais* was the only tragedy left to be translated in 1581, and so Newton tells Heneage in his dedicatory epistles that he reluctantly accepted the assignment. Heywood likewise emphasizes his care when translating Seneca's texts, highlighting his departures from the original while reinforcing how he still captured the author's original meaning.

That Newton included paratexts that addressed the condition of Seneca's source texts is noteworthy because he and Marsh excluded from the *Tenne Tragedies* one of most fabulous verse meditations on textual error printed in the period. Prefacing the early octavo edition of *Thyestes* (1560), Jasper Heywood narrates a dream in which the ghost of Seneca descends from the heavens to provide the young scholar with the first, original volume of the ten tragedies, which Heywood is invited to use for his translations. In Heywood's vision, Seneca's "gylded booke" was crafted by the nine Muses in Helicon who formed the parchment from the "silken skyns" of Parnassus fawns, mixed precious water with Myrrha's gum-like tears to make a "gorgeous glyttryng golden Jnke", and meticulously transcribed the texts of the tragedies devoid of any errors (Ker and Winston 2012, 111-12). This ethereal collection was a far cry from the fault-laden editions of the tragedies printed on the continent by Sebastian Gryphius and Aldus Manutius, which Heywood explicitly named¹⁷. As Heywood envisions it, the perfect authorial collection has no precedent; it descends from the heavens flawless and complete in its only manifestation. Heywood supplies in the form of fantasy what he perceives was lacking from his own translation: a perfect, reliable source text.

There could be a number of reasons why Heywood's narrative poem was not reprinted in the *Tenne Tragedies*. Newton and Marsh may have reasoned that presenting Heywood as Seneca's chosen translator would reflect poorly on the others, including Newton himself. Or, perhaps Heywood's long poem, displaying his own authorial ingenuity, would have taken up too much space and paper in a project that was devoted to presenting Seneca's works. Either way, the exclusion reinforces that when Seneca's authorship was being reconstructed in

17 Heywood is probably referring to *Scenecae Tragoediae* printed in Venice by Aldus Manutius in 1517 and *L. Annae Senecae Cordubensis*, which was printed in Lyon by Sebastian Gryphius in 1541 and 1548.

the *Tenne Tragedies*, discourses about challenging source texts were included but they were not allowed to become the focus of any prefatory epistle or argument. Moreover, as Newton and Marsh presented it, the ideal Senecan translation did not depend on an error-free original; rather, it depended on whether the translator understood Seneca well enough to convey his “sence”, or as Newton wrote in the dedicatory epistle, his “direct meaning”. Newton’s Seneca was a didactic author; therefore, the editor assures readers that his “whole wrytings”, probably a reference to his moral epistles, are edifying (sig. A3^v). As Newton avers, no other classical writer can rival Seneca who “with more grauity of Philosophicall sentences, more waightynes of sappy words, or greater authority of sou[n]d matter beateth down sinne, loose lyfe, dissolute dealing, and vnbyrdled sensuality” (sigs. A3^v-A4^r). To offer readers a collection that was authentically Seneca’s, the translators needed to honor the author’s sense and objectives, which Newton insists was the moral reform of the reader.

Like the *Tenne Tragedies*, the Shakespeare Folio claims to capture its author’s intentions, but also like Heywood in his 1560 dream vision, the First Folio’s makers report concerns that fraudulent copies of Shakespeare’s plays have been circulating and misrepresenting his works¹⁸. If there is one message that the Folio’s front matter must communicate, it is that the plays within the collection are Shakespeare’s “true originall copies” as is explicitly stated on its title page. When Blount and Jaggard published the collection, they included eighteen plays that had not been printed before. The other eighteen had been formerly published in an array of editions, and, even though some of the plays in the Folio were exact reprints of those earlier copies, other plays show evidence of editors consulting additional witnesses to produce the best version of the text¹⁹. Who did this editorial work is unknown, but the prefatory epistles situate Heminge and Condell as the careful, loving compilers of the author’s original manuscripts. Granted, they wished “the Author himselfe had liu’d to haue set

18 For Andrew Murphy (1999, 57-58), the juxtaposition of Heywood’s dream vision and epistles in the First Folio serve as a reminder to modern textual editors that the search for the author’s true, original work behind the printed text, is itself fed by fantasy.

19 Egan provides a clear summary of the editorial work on the Folio. For a fuller treatment, see Massai 2007.

forth, and overseen his owne writings", but the actors assume their role as trusted caretakers who only "collect" the manuscripts on their dead friend's behalf. Because Shakespeare's "mind and hand went together", his manuscripts were ostensibly perfect and captured his true intentions: "we haue scarce receiued from him a blot in his papers" (sig. pA3^r). These words imply that there was no need for any editorial interventions across the thirty-six perfectly executed play-texts. But, as the actors also confess, the new collection was designed to rectify the prior exploitation of Shakespeare's works²⁰. Heminge and Condell announce that readers have been "abus'd with diuerse stolne, and surreptitious copies" of Shakespeare plays. These editions were "maimed, and deformed by the frauds and stealthes of iniurious impostors, that expos'd them" (sig. pA3^r). Considering the damage done to their friend's reputation and the integrity of his corpus, Heminge and Condell promise that the Folio delivers the true original copies of Shakespeare's plays, "cur'd, and perfect... as he conceiued the[m]" (sig. pA3^r). Readers were presented with a simple choice: buy the Folio that contains the plays as Shakespeare intended them, or settle for the embezzled knockoffs.

In the Folio, the paratexts and typography do most of the work of establishing for readers that the texts were truly and originally Shakespeare's. For one, the title "Mr William Shakespeares Comedies, Histories, & Tragedies" as they have been "[p]ublished according to the True Originall Copies" reinforced the unity and authenticity of the plays collected under his name. But, a few pages later, readers were presented with a list of twenty-six "Names of the Principall actors in all these plays" (sig. pA5+2^r). This page locates the author among a network of theater practitioners and implies that the plays within were part of a legacy that was much larger than Shakespeare alone. The Folio's makers may have been aware of the tension this page produced in the preliminaries, for they took up a significant portion of the page to textually and typographically remind readers that despite Shakespeare's collaborations with other actors, his plays are all "ORIGINALL":

20 For more discussion on how previously printed copies of Shakespeare's texts were deemed defective so that the new volume could be marketed as the authentic version, see Kastan 2001, 74-76 and Erne 2003, 255-58.

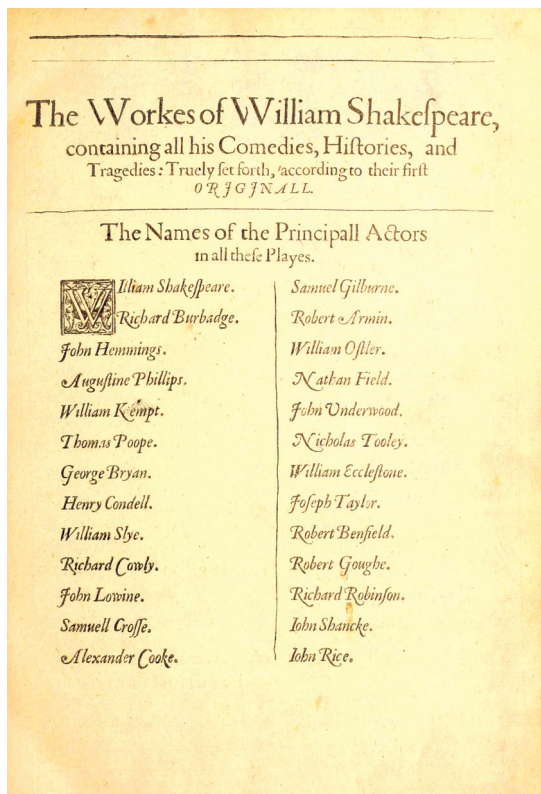


Fig. 3 The Names of the Principall Actors in all these Playes. sig. pA5+2r.
Boston Public Library, RARE BKS G.174.1 FOLIO.

The commendatory poems in the Folio's preliminaries impel readers to buy the Folio based on the premise that unmediated access to Shakespeare's mind lies within its pages. In Ben Jonson's poem on the Droeshout portrait, for instance, the poet explains that the engraving of Shakespeare is faulty, and thus, finding an accurate illustration of the author requires that readers "look / Not on his Picture, but his Booke" (sig. pA1^v). The poem jests that while others' hands might try to capture the life and wit of Shakespeare in static art, their interference only degrades his image, literally and figuratively. Leonard Digges' poem in the Folio likewise reminds readers that the Folio is the only portal through which "Shakespeare" becomes immortal: "This Booke, / When Brasse and Marble fade, shall make thee looke / Fresh to all Ages" and "eury Line, each verse / Here shall

reuiue, redeeme thee from thy Herse", an allusion to Horace's "Exegi monumentum aere perennius" (sig. pA5+1^r)²¹. As Digges' poem insists, when the plays are printed from the author's own hand, the Folio's "eury Line, each verse" can invoke the living Shakespeare. Like Horace, Shakespeare will become an author "not of an age, but for all time" (sig. pA4^r) through a textual monument.

The *Tenne Tragedies* and the First Folio differ overall in the way they construct the "Author" in relation to textual authenticity, but both collections rest on the same foundational claim – that the collection conveys its author's true intentions. For the publishers of the Shakespeare First Folio, the previously published copies of Shakespeare's plays were a threat to their profits. Alluding to those earlier editions as "stolen" and "deformed" worked to undermine the Folio's competition. As scholars have surmised, the "surreptitious" copies may have referred specifically to a quarto collection of ten plays attributed to Shakespeare and assembled and sold to readers by the Jaggards in 1619 (Lesser, 2021, 13). This quarto collection looked like a compilation of separately printed playbooks and had neither a uniform title page nor any paratextual apparatus, but it was still one way to buy a pre-assembled collection of ten Shakespeare plays. Given that some customers may have recently purchased this quarto set or other Shakespeare playbooks in the market, Blount and Jaggard had to differentiate their new product. Through this emphasis on the true, original plays, the publishers implied that all past playbooks attributed to the author were stolen and falsely derived. To sell the Folio, Blount and Jaggard wanted customers to know that even if they could buy or assemble their own collections from old quartos, this 1623 edition was more complete, more perfect, and more true to Shakespeare's first original intentions.

That Newton and Marsh were less concerned about the authenticity of their Senecan source texts makes sense. If readers refused to buy the *Tenne Tragedies*, it would not be because Seneca's *Thebais* was left fragmented or lines from *Troas* were missing from manuscripts. Rather, as Newton mentions to Sir Thomas Heneage in his dedication, those who criticize the collection will be the "Aeropagites" who consider "Heathen" writers like Seneca to be dangerous for vernacu-

21 Thanks are due to a peer reviewer who pointed out the allusion to Horace.

lar readers (sig. A3^v). What the *Tenne Tragedies* had to offer to customers, as expressed in Newton's epistle, was reassurance that despite being a non-Christian, Seneca decried sinful living and praised behaviors befitting a good English Protestant. It was the collection's job then to promote this version of Seneca, the philosopher-tragedian, who would, with the help of the English translators, guide common English readers to the path of virtue.

Collaboration

Newton and Marsh created a collection that presented itself to English readers as a vehicle for transmitting Seneca's moral teachings. In effect, the 1581 collection retained its single-authorship logic, centered on the "Seneca" while it documented the labors of the individual translators. Whereas the First Folio constructed "Shakespeare" as a writer who had no equal and transcended time, the collection was also seeded with details that situated Shakespeare and his success within his theatrical community. Together, the *Tenne Tragedies* and the First Folio expose how representing collaboration while touting the singularity of an "Author" was a bibliographical balancing act played out in creative ways on the page.

In the *Tenne Tragedies*, head-titles announce the start of each translation, providing the names of the translators, and, for some, their former status at the English universities and their date of translation. The head-title for *Oedipus*, for instance, reveals that the translation was "Englished The yeare of our Lord M.D.LX. By Alexander Nevyle" (sig. L5^v, 77^v). Similarly, the head-title for *Thyestes* names Heywood as the translator and publicizes his previous status as a "Fellow of Alsolne Colledge in Oxenforde", as he had been in 1560 when the individual edition was first published (sig. D5^r, 21^r). For the head-titles of Heywood's *Hercules Furens* and *Troas*, Studley's *Agamemnon* and *Medea*, and Nuce's *Octavia*, Newton gleaned the words directly from the single editions' title pages²². For *Thebais*, Newton provides

22 Newton did, however, add "L. Annaes" to Seneca's name in the 1581 head-titles for *Agamemnon* and *Medea* and deleted Studley's and Nuce's Cambridge student status, information which had been printed on the title pages of the single editions of *Agamemnon*, *Medea*, and *Octavia*. See Bibliography for the full titles of the single editions.

the date of his translation, “1581”, and signs the end of the tragedy with his name and county of birth, “Thomas Newtonus, Cestreshyrius” (sig. F8^r, 40^r; H6^v, 64^v). Adding select information about the translators confirmed that the collection was a domestic product born of collective English labor.

Newton advances this image of a united English cohort of translators in his dedicatory epistle to Heneage. To Newton, the other translators are called his “fellowes” and he praises their translations, which he claims were “deliuered with singuler dexterity” (sig. A3^{r-v}). For his own contribution, *Thebais*, Newton confesses it is best hidden among the “perfection of others ... workma[n]ship”. That Newton was shaping the translators into a coherent group with joint aims was not disingenuous, as all had been participating in a national translation movement to bringing classical works of literature and philosophy to those without Latin literacy (Gillespie 2011, 39-46). As Stuart Gillespie explains, English translators in the period were “deeply aware of their predecessors” and sought to “embody within their work the best parts of the traditions” in which they saw themselves participating (Gillespie 2011, 11). Throughout the 1560s, for instance, some of the Senecan translators explicitly reflected on the work of their predecessors. Studley, for instance, perceived Heywood and Neville’s texts as an invitation to translate other tragedies, such as *Agamemnon* (1566) and *Medea* (1566). He held the others’ translations in high regard, declaring in his preface that they were so “excellently well done (that in reading of them it semeth to me no translation, but euen SENECA hym selfe to speke in englysh)” (sig. A7^v). Thomas Nuce, whose *Octavia* (1566) was published that same year, composed a dedicatory verse for Studley’s edition that exalted the young translators’ ability to communicate plainly Seneca’s verse. Having read Studley’s *Agamemnon*, Nuce confesses that his friendship with Studley at first motivated him to write a commendation, but that after reading the translation, he was compelled to praise him all the more (sigs. ¶ii- ¶v). These public-facing prefatory notes from the 1560s were not reprinted in the *Tenne Tragedies*, even though they might have helped Newton portray the translators as cooperative community. Nevertheless, these paratexts from the earlier editions offered certain translators more acclamations than others, and for Newton, this unequal praise

might have compromised the goals for the volume. Teaching readers to live pure lives by leaving wickedness behind was the stated objective of the *Tenne Tragedies*; epistles gushing over a few translators' elegant phrases or facility with adapting Seneca's high tragic style to English, may have framed the book more as a literary project than a pedagogical one.

Fashioning this English cooperative was also predicated on the complex use of typography and *mise-en-page*. Nowhere is this complexity more visible than in the *Tenne Tragedies*' table of translators.

THE NAMES OF
THE TRAGEDIES OF
SENECA, AND
by whom each of
them was trans-
lated.

1	Hercules Furens,	}	By Iasper Heywood.
2	Thyestes,		
6	Troas,		
5	Oedipus,	}	1560. By Alex. Neville.
4	Hippolytus,		
7	Medea,	}	By John Studley.
8	Agamemnon,		
10	Hercules Octaus.		
9	Ocfania,	}	By T. Nuce.
3	Thebaïs.	}	By Thomas Newton.

Fig. 4 The Names of the Tragedies of Seneca, and by whom each of them was translated, sig. A4^v. Boston Public Library, RARE BKS G.4073.7.

Appearing on the page following Newton's dedicatory epistle, this unique catalogue displays three vertical columns that present "The Names of the Tragedies of Seneca, and by whom each of them was translated" (sig. A4^v). On the left side of the page, the titles of the trag-

edies are accompanied by corresponding numbers that reflect their order in the volume: 1) *Hercules Furens*, 2) *Thyestes*, 3) *Thebais*, 4) *Hippolytus*, 5) *Oedipus*, 6) *Troas*, 7) *Medea*, 8) *Agamemnon*, 9) *Octavia*, and 10) *Hercules Oetaeus*. The ordinal numbering did not reflect the chronology of Seneca's composition or their English translation but was a vestige of what is called the A-manuscript tradition²³. Throughout the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, nearly all printed editions of Seneca's tragedies on the continent retained this sequential arrangement of the plays, so that over time the titles of the tragedies became associated with their numbers (e.g., *The First Tragedy, Hercules Furens*)²⁴. Therefore, even when the tragedies were not printed together in a collected edition, each play still would have been understood as an ordered part of Seneca's complete dramatic oeuvre²⁵.

As noted above, Newton and Marsh used the ordinal numbering to organize the plays in the collection, but in this catalogue, they imposed a new order on the tragedies based on translator. The first column, as seen in Figure 4, displays the numbers of the tragedies, and neatly spaced to the right of the numbers are the corresponding titles, forming the second column. Braces running down the middle of the page divide the information vertically and horizontally. These braces group the numbers and titles on the left side of the page into five separate units. When glancing horizontally from the left side of the page to the right, readers can note that the braces point to the individual translators who were responsible for rendering the specific tragedies clustered on the left. One can see that "1 *Hercules Furens*, 2 *Thyestes*, 6 *Troas*" comprise the first set and were translated "By Jasper

23 The A manuscript branch was known by humanist scholars in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The E manuscript, found in 1640, includes only nine plays in a different order and with some variant titles. See Smith 1967, 49-50. Tarrant (1976, 23-86) provides a meticulous analysis of the tragedies in manuscripts.

24 Only one continental edition, to my knowledge, does not follow the traditional sequence, and that is Seneca 1576. The following editions organize the tragedies following the A manuscript: Seneca 1498, 1506, 1510, 1514, 1517, 1529, 1541, 1548, 1550, 1563, 1574, and 1581.

25 See Staley 2000 for a critique of Berthe Marti's arguments about the order of Seneca's tragedies as authorially intended: "when applied to the play, Marti's theory just does not work" (144). Staley explains that the A family order of tragedies "reflects at best the insight of Seneca's early interpreters rather than that of Seneca himself" (144).

Heywood". Spaced two lines below is the second group consisting of only one play, "5 *Oedipus*", translated "By Alex. Neuille". The third cluster of plays, "4 *Hippolytus*, 7 *Medea*, 8 *Agamemnon*, 10 *Hercules Octaeus*", were translated "By Iohn Studley". The fourth group, including only "9 *Octauia*" "By T. Nuce", is followed by the fifth and final unit also with only one play, "3 *Thebais*" "By Thomas Newton".

Through the table's vertical column of translators' names, Newton and Marsh accomplished two tasks: they recognized the translators who contributed to the collection and presented the approximate order of publication. Heywood, at the top of the column, was the first to have his translation reach print, followed by Neville, then Studley, Nuce, and finally Newton. That Newton and Marsh may have been trying to build a rough chronology of translations is also apparent in the table as the date "1560" appears above Neville's name. Although *Oedipus* was not published until 1563, the *Tenne Tragedies* records 1560 as the date of the translation's composition, as *Oedipus*' head-title also confirms (sig. L5^v, 77^v)²⁶. The *mise-en-page* of the catalogue paraded the history of the translation project before English readers. All in all, this table documents the kinds of negotiations that Newton and Marsh faced while creating a content guide for a volume that presented its collaborative, textual, and bibliographical history *as content*.

To ensure that the *Tenne Tragedies* was complete and recorded his own contributions, Newton translated the fragmented *Thebais*, but not without confessing to Heneage that his translation was "an vnatural abortion" and an "vnperfect Embryon" (sig. A3^v). Although Newton adopted the *humilitas topos* in the dedication, he begins *Thebais* by underscoring his personal contributions with typographic markers. When readers turned to the first page of the translation, they would have seen a large woodcut letter ornament of the letter "D", with Newton's initials "T.N" appearing within the letter above his own coat of arms (sig. G1^r, 41^r).

26 As I'll address more below, Neville significantly revised *Oedipus* from the 1563 edition. Spearing notes that "Almost every line of the translation contains some alteration from the earlier versions. In the edition of 1563 Neville's versification had been extremely irregular [...] In the later edition the versification runs much more smoothly, and the greater number of the irregularities have been removed, though one or two examples remain" (1912, 23).

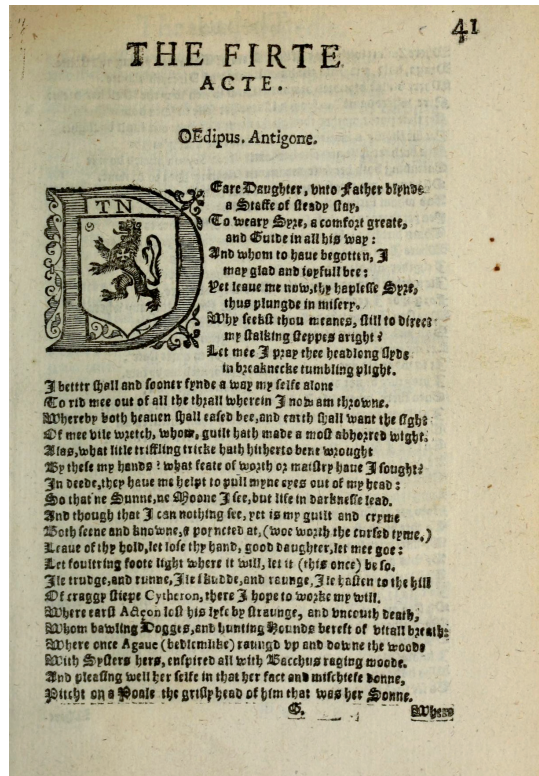


Fig. 5 Thomas Newton's *Thebais*, sig. G1^r, 41^r.
Boston Public Library, RARE BKS G.4073.7.

The sable and cross symbols on the shield conveyed his descent from the Newtons of Newton and Pownall in England (Leigh 1967, I: vii; Morrissey 1957, 23). By inscribing a signifier of his status as an Englishman and his own lineage onto the printed text of *Thebais*, Newton aligns himself with his collection; both textually and typographically encode their lineage on the *Tenne Tragedies*.

The collection sought not to hide its diachronic and collaborative creation; rather, that was the objective, to make Seneca English by showcasing how this collective of English scholars mediated his difficult, ancient texts for the benefit of the English nation. The goal of this project was not to elicit excessive praise for each translator's literary talents but to share Seneca's teachings with readers who could not understand the tragedies in Latin. Of course, the chronology of

translations on the table emphasized the translators' individual contributions over time but their presentation on the page offered an orderly representation of these "fellowes", each contributing to the project by translating those tragedies still needing to be Englished. As a metaphor and paradigm of humanist collaboration, the *Tenne Tragedies* indirectly taught its readers the virtues of carrying on the legacy of those whose past labors brought forth fruits for all in a nation to share. This lesson could not be relayed with a single Seneca translation or through the pen of a single translator; the whole multiply-translated, variously-produced collection was the ideal instructional vehicle.

The overarching principle of the collection, Seneca's authorship, became a common denominator among this group of five English translators with vastly divergent religious and political views²⁷. In fact, James Ker and Jessica Winston warn that the *Tenne Tragedies* makes "the translations look more like a 'project' than they were" (Ker and Winston 2012, 3). As they explain, critics have tended to treat the translators as if they were unified in purpose or with shared political agendas, when, in fact, each of the translators had his own motivations when preparing his work, and each of the editions from 1559 to 1566 reveal the diversity of these approaches²⁸. Newton and Marsh were well aware of this heterogeneity. What they had before them in 1581 was a compilation of texts and paratexts, some in print and some in manuscript, some heavily revised and some with small corrections. As editor, Newton ironed out the unevenness among the translations to present Seneca's ten tragedies as a complete, unified venture, although not without making his own contributions to the collection visible. Deciding what belonged in the collection (and what did not) depended not on the goals of the individual translators at the time of composition or publication but rather on Marsh and

27 As Ross argues, the rise of Seneca and his stoic philosophy in the period was largely a product of the religious conflicts spurred by the Reformation: "It seems that in Seneca's stoic philosophy and its exemplum in the *Tenne Tragedies*, the moderate Protestant Newton apparently found a common language for men of different creeds" (1974,148). Notably, Jasper Heywood fled England around 1563 to train as a Jesuit priest, and thus, Newton and Marsh would have considered how best to present the work of an English Catholic.

28 For instance, with *Hercules Furens*, Heywood produced a Latin and English parallel edition for the benefit of students.

Newton's vision for the *Tenne Tragedies* and the kind of "Seneca" that they believe would sell to customers. It is not by chance that the *Tenne Tragedies* presents itself as a "project"²⁹. That more than four-hundred years later scholars are still treating the translators as a community with a common aim is a testament to the success of Newton and Marsh's direct efforts in 1581.

The *Tenne Tragedies* balanced its authority on "Seneca" and the collaborative group of English translators. In a similar way, the First Folio vacillates between two versions of the authorial Shakespeare: the dramatist who transcends time and a playwright with deep roots in the seventeenth-century London theater community³⁰. The rhetorical strategies used to construct the immortal or transcendent Shakespeare in the First Folio's commendatory verses were not unique, and as others have shown, some of the devices were derived from classical sources and thus were merely recycled by the editors of the First Folio (Kastan 2001, 64-65). But, there were special threads that alluded specifically to Shakespeare's style of authorship. Shakespeare was deemed a "happie imitator of Nature", as expressed by Heminge and Condell (sig. pA3^v). This depiction finds reinforcement in Jonson's eulogistic poem, "To the Memory of my beloved Mr William Shakespeare" where he avers that Shakespeare derived his art from "Nature her selfe", rather than from classical sources or his English contemporaries (sig. pA4^{r-v}). As Jonson presents it, Shakespeare's "small Latine and less Greeke" is not an impediment. Instead, the greatest tragedians who ever lived would, if they could, praise Shakespeare's tragedies. Jonson imagines calling "forth thund'ring Aeschylus, / Euripides and Sophocles to us; Pacuvius, Accius, him of Cordova dead, / To life again, to hear thy buskin tread, / And shake a stage" (sig. pA4^r). This version of Shakespeare owes nothing to these ancient authors – including Seneca or "him of Cordova

29 Granted, the vision of a complete English Seneca was beginning to emerge in the paratexts of the individual editions. For instance, in 1560, Heywood imagined Seneca's ghost helping him produce the complete tragedies in English, and Studley's and Nuce's friendship sparked the production of more editions.

30 As is well known, the co-written *Pericles* and *Two Noble Kinsman* were excluded from the Folio, although readers would not necessarily have noticed they were missing. Still, we can deduce that the makers of the First Folio did not want to include co-written plays.

dead" – for Shakespeare has risen to such heights as a dramatist that even the ghosts of these classical giants would clamor for his plays. As for the ancient comedic authors, Jonson claims that Shakespeare has far outdone them: "all that insolent Greece or haughty Rome" has offered in comedy – from Aristophanes to Terence and Plautus – are "[b]ut antiquated and deserted lie" (sig. pA4^v). Already declared the best of the English poets, prevailing over Chaucer, Spenser, Beaumont, Lyly, Kyd, and Marlowe, it is Shakespeare who emerges from the Folio's front matter as the premier dramatic author not only in Britain but also in all of Europe: "Triumph, my Britain, thou hast one to show / To whom all scenes of Europe homage owe" (sig. pA4^v). Jonson's poem, intended to clear Shakespeare of any debts to fellow playwrights or classical sources, paradoxically ensures that Shakespeare is rhetorically situated within this very literary network.

Representing Shakespeare as an author who imitated only nature bristled against the classical influenced used to organize his collection of plays. Jonson's emphasis on Shakespeare's talents as a writer of "Tragedy" and "Comedy" materializes in the First Folio's title, *Comedies, Histories, & Tragedies*, and again on the volume's catalogue, with a third genre "History" squeezed in between the other two categories (Braden 2015, 383-87). This "Catalogue of the seuerall Comedies, Histories, and Tragedies contained in this Volume" presents headings for each of the three genres in a two-columned table (sig. pA4^r). The plays in the Comedies and Tragedies have no apparent rationale for their order, but the Histories follow the chronology of English Kings, starting with *King John* and ending with *Henry the Eighth*. According to the Folio's catalogue, there is no slippage or overlap between genres – no plays that might be considered "historical tragedies" or "comical histories". Prior to 1623, Shakespeare's plays moved rather fluidly between and among genres. *Richard II*, for instance, was labelled a "tragedie" when published in quarto from 1597 to 1615, but in the Folio, it joined the Histories. The three genres provided bibliographical divisions for the book, as each genre started with new pagination. Reducing Shakespeare's bulky corpus into three categories also offered the printers an efficient way to begin work on a new section while waiting to finish another (Hinman 1963, II, 504). Additionally, like the ordinal numbering of Seneca's tragedies, the generic divisions in the First Folio hearkened back to the manuscript traditions of

classical dramatists. Collections that consistently paired authors with their respective dramatic genres – eg. Seneca’s Tragedies or Plautus’ Comedies – turned formal generic features internal to the playtexts into bibliographical categories wherein texts of a similar kind could be grouped and contained. The Folio’s use of such broad, classically-oriented genres, at least for Comedies and Tragedies, seemed to detach Shakespeare’s plays from their performance in the theaters where mixed forms such as historical-tragedies, comical-histories, and tragi-comedies were readily consumed by audiences.

For the makers of the First Folio, “Shakespeare” had to be authentically independent of classical and domestic influences, while still being recognizable to English readers. For this reason, Heminge and Condell, members of the King’s Men with Shakespeare, remind us in their epistles that the Folio presents “our Shakespeare”, that is, their own collective re-remembering of his identity when he was their personal friend and professional colleague. For Heminge and Condell, Shakespeare’s plays were ready for print consumption in collection, not only because they were the true original copies, but also because on the London stages they “haue had their triall alreadie, and stood out All Appeales” (sig. pA3^v). Similar associations emerge from the commendatory verses, wherein Jonson, an authority on English drama, locates Shakespeare in the world of theatrical performance – “The applause! Delight! the wonder of our Stage!” Jonson’s “Shakespeare” is the “Soule of the Age” (sig. pA3^v).

More than any other paratextual device in the Shakespeare First Folio, the page announcing the “The Names of the Principall Actors in all these Playes” presents “Shakespeare” as a collaborating member of the theater community (sig. pA5+2^r). Within this list, twenty-six names are arranged in two columns, identifying figures who had been members of the Chamberlain’s Men or were actors or managers for the King’s Men. Notably, the makers of the First Folio allocate significant space to printing the names in relatively large type. This page constructs a kind of monument to the theatrical community, especially the actors who performed in Shakespeare’s plays (Connor, 2012, 232). Shakespeare’s own name appears at the top of the list in the first column, above “Richard Burbadge”, “John Hemmings”, “Augustine Phillips”, “William Kempt”, “Thomas Poope”, “George Bryan”, “Henry Condell”, William Sly”, “Richard Cowly”, “John Lowine”, “Samuell Grosse”, and “Alexander

Cooke" (sig. A5+2^r). As a monument to collaboration, the table directs readers to understand that Shakespeare's rise to fame was due in large part to these men who brought his plays to life. Some of these men were dead by 1623, but this page may have served as a touchstone for readers who remembered the likes of Burbage and Kempe from the theaters but not the name of the playwright who wrote their parts³¹. Not unlike "The Names of the Translators" in the *Tenne Tragedies*, the "Names of the Principall Actors" visually represent a collaborative group of Englishmen who like the playtexts are gathered under the name of their "Author."

Nothing about the Shakespeare First Folio was inevitable, and under different conditions, it might not even have come to fruition (de Grazia 1991, 30). Juxtaposing the two multi-text play collections helps us see what else was possible when agents assembled a large compilation of English playtexts in the period. For instance, if the 1623 edition had adopted the *Tenne Tragedies*' strategies for documenting the many hands that produced the texts, we would now know more about the processes of dramatic composition and the role that Shakespeare and others played in writing the thirty-six plays. However, one also wonders whether "Shakespeare" might have disappeared among the collaborative authorial clutter. On the other hand, the abundance of epistles and commendatory verses in the First Folio raises questions about the *Tenne Tragedies* and what additional accolades could have done for the edition. The Folio's effusive poems in the frontmatter largely supported Shakespeare's construction as a timeless "Author"; such work was unnecessary for a classical dramatist like Seneca and perhaps even deemed inappropriate for a volume of translations with pedagogical goals. Yet, Newton does not hold back on typographic markers that called attention to his own interventions and editorial work in the *Tenne Tragedies*. He may not have integrated poems of praise for the *Tenne Tragedies*, but he did demand some recognition from readers for his contributions to the project.

We can only wish that the editor(s) of the First Folio had set their initials and arms on the material book like Newton had. If Heminge and Condell edited the collection, they deny it outright in order to pass off the Folio's texts as deriving from the author's original, unblotted papers. Still, it makes sense that they would be the agents who

31 For biographies of the actors, see Gurr 2004, Appendix 1.

sought to connect Shakespeare's legacy to the theaters and prepare "The Names of the Principall Actors" for the volume, wherein their names were also immortalized. Had the "Catalogue" of Shakespeare's plays been designed more like the "Names of the Translators" in the *Tenne Tragedies*, the Folio might have revealed the plays' chronology of composition or performance, either in lieu of the divisions into Comedies, Histories, and Tragedies, or in addition to them. Such a page might have offered an overarching view of Shakespeare's whole career as a dramatist, charting his growth as a writer, and fixing his works in historic time with the dates of composition and/or performance added to the plays' head-titles. For works that had been revised over the years, the head-titles to Shakespeare's plays might have communicated to readers where, when, and why such variations arose and to what extent Shakespeare was departing from his "source text". Instead, the head-titles in Shakespeare's Folio merely record the title of the play.

Granted, Shakespeare's corpus might have been difficult to navigate if the actual plays had been arranged in the volume by chronology instead of by the three genres. Even the *Tenne Tragedies* did not order the translations by date in the volume, but instead reproduced the numbered order in which Seneca's tragedies had been arranged for centuries and that readers had come to expect. A reader of the First Folio need not study the Catalogue for long to grasp the lists' three-part structure, which correlated with the three separately paginated sections of the volume. Providing readers with an efficient way to find the plays they wanted to read was a much harder task for a volume of thirty-six plays than it was for a volume of ten. The size of Shakespeare's corpus, rendered materially visible through the format and thickness of the edition, might have communicated that Shakespeare's dramatic breadth exceeded even Seneca's.

Pedagogies of Play Reading

Both the *Tenne Tragedies* and the Shakespeare Folio sought to teach readers how to make sense of a large grouping of plays attributed to one author, although the learning outcome for each collection were quite different. When analyzed together, the Seneca and Shakespeare editions illustrate how collections of English plays could function as instructional tools.

For Thomas Marsh and Thomas Newton, the multi-text compilation was appropriated as an expedient book format that could bring learning and edification to English readers. Seneca's *Tenne Tragedies* was exactly this kind of volume, but it was not the first collection project for Newton and Marsh. In 1569, the publisher printed Newton's translations of Cicero's treatises "Paradoxa" and "Scipio's Dream" and later that same year, he published Newton's translation of Cicero's "Old Age." Both editions presumably sold well, because in 1577, a fourth and final treatise was translated by Newton, Cicero's "Friendship", and Marsh published all the translations together in *Four Several Treatises of M. Tullius Cicero*. Newton explains in the dedication to the collection that he was disappointed with the "peecefmeale" publication of the treatises and thus translated the fourth "because the whole Worke being by that meanes fully supplied, shoulde come forth uniforme, and in one maner of Style and order"; when the treatises were "brought into order", the collection was "best to breede the Readers profit" (sig. A2^r). That the *Tenne Tragedies* was completed with Newton's *Thebais* and brought into order with Marsh as publisher, suggests that 1581 volume was part of a larger project that they had already begun, which was to curate, gather, and publish collections of useful learning material for vernacular readers³².

Publishing the *Tenne Tragedies* fit well within Marsh's own specialization, and when he financed the edition, he must have sensed there was a readership for the book. As the patent holder for Latin schoolbooks in the English book trade, Marsh made his living printing, selling and distributing a variety of Latin and English pedagogical texts, including various editions of Terence from his own press (Teramura 2019, 69–82). Although scholars have shown that Seneca's tragedies were not part of the traditional English grammar school curriculum, the Seneca translations were produced by university-educated men and became popular among students at the Inns of Court, as Jessica Winston has shown

32 Other Newton-Marsh projects included *The touchstone of complexions* (1576, 1581), *Straunge, lamentable, and tragicall histories* (1577), and *Approved medicines and cordiall receiptes* (1580). Newton also added preliminaries to some of Marsh's editions, such as *The golden booke of the leaden goddess* (1577), *Bulleins bulwarke* (1579), *The five books of Hieronimus Osorius* (1576), and *A moral methode of ciuile policie* (1576). See Braden (2004) for Newton's contributions to the press, notably John Leland's poems published in *Illustrium aliquot Anglorum encomia* (1589).

(Winston 2016, 152-170). Marsh's shop located on Fleet Street near St. Dunstan's Church put him within a stone's throw of Serjeant's Inn and Clifford's Inn and just a few minutes' walk to Temple Bar, the Inner Temple, Middle Temple, and other Inns of Court³³. For students travelling to and from the Inns, Marsh's shop must have been a convenient place to purchase the new Seneca edition among many other suitable collections.

As mentioned above, transforming the "Heathen" Seneca into a palatable "English Seneca" was going to require some finesse. In his epistle to Heneage, Newton anticipates that his project to make Seneca accessible to English audiences will be criticized. Yet, Newton dismisses these critiques, and as noted before, explains that Seneca's "whole wrytings", which presumably included his moral philosophy, will lead readers to virtue. However, the editor also acknowledges that Seneca's intentions could be misconstrued if readers focus only on the "Phrases and sente[n]ces", or only on pithy *sententiae* for which Seneca was famous:

it is by some squemysh Areopagites surmyzed, that the readinge of these Tragedies, being entlerarded with many Phrases and sente[n]ces, literally tending (at the first sight) sometime to the prayse of Ambition, sometime to the maynten[n]ce of cruelty, now and then to the approbation of incontinencie, and here and there to the ratification of tyranny, can not be digested without great dau[ng]ler of infection. (sig. A3^v)

Here, Newton begins by addressing the dangers of selective reading and offers a solution: read Seneca's lines in context. Readers who peruse the tragedies and find speeches condoning cruelty, ambition, and tyranny must "mark and consider the circumstances, why, where, & by what maner of persons such sentences are pronoun[n]ced, they ca[n]not in any equity otherwise choose, but find good cause ynough to leade the[m] to a more fauourable and milde resolutio[n]" (sig. A3^v). Therefore, by encouraging forms of critical reading in which character and plot are integral to exegesis, Newton both answers potential critics and offers advice to readers who are approaching this non-Christian author and his ancient tragedies for the first time³⁴.

33 Janelle Jenstad, Greg Newton, and Kim McLean-Fiander.

34 Green (1990, 93-94) proposes that the tragedies would have challenged readers in Elizabethan England who were inexperienced with interpreting dramatic texts with mimetic representation.

To reap the rewards of Seneca's lessons on virtue and vice, contextualized reading is essential, but reading the whole collection, as Seneca presumably intended, is best. The editor explains that when readers find a passage that promotes sin, they should remember that

it may not at any ha[n]d be thought and deemed the direct meaning of SENECA himselfe, whose whole wrytinges penned with a peerelesse sublimity and loftinesse of Style, are so farre from counteneaucing Vice, that I doubt whether there bee any amonge all the Catalogue of Heathen wryters, that with more grauity of Philosophicall sentences... beateth down sinne, loose lyfe, dissolute dealinge, and vnbrydled sensuality: or that more sensibly, pithily, and bytingly layeth downe the guerdon of filthy lust, cloaked dissimulation & odious treachery: which is the dryft, whereunto he leueleth the whole yssue of ech one of his Tragedies. (sig. A3v-A4r)

Having edited and compiled each tragedy, Newton confirms that every single one condemns lust, dissimulation, and treachery. In fact, Seneca's sole intention when writing each tragedy was the repudiation of evil; thus, there is no danger in consuming the whole volume or any individual play. Readers should not, however, ignore Seneca's copia of "Philosophicall senteneces"; rather, they should recognize that the abundance of *sententiae* enriches the message of the whole inter-relational volume.

While Newton could not give his readers the entire works of Seneca in English, he did give them the next best thing: all ten tragedies. Because every play reinforced the dangers of sinful living, the collection could be a more effective means of instruction than any single play alone. If Newton was familiar with Seneca's second epistle "On Discursive Reading", then he knew that the philosopher encouraged the practice of reading books thoroughly and completely over time, rather than rummaging quickly through many authors and texts in a day (Gummere 1917, IV, 6-8). Perhaps even more relevant, though, were the epistles that delivered Seneca's advice on how to interpret drama. From the *Moral Epistles*, Seneca "advises us to read drama for philosophical and morally uplifting maxims (Ep. 8.8)" and "notes that we should wait until the end and see how vice is punished (Ep. 115.14-15)" (Star 2016, 35). For Seneca, tragedies were pedagogical texts to be read completely, with the reader engaging with *sententiae*

and focusing on the lessons taught through each play's tragic conclusion. By apprising novice English readers on how to interpret the tragedies, Newton was actually delivering instructions that echoed Seneca's own advice to play-readers.

The two epistles that Newton includes from Alexander Neville's 1563 edition of *Oedipus* underscore what the *Tenne Tragedies* ultimately sought to teach. The first epistle is a dedication to Nicholas Wotton, a respected English diplomat, who was alive when Neville composed the translation in 1560 and dead by the time the 1581 collection was published. Reprinting the outdated dedication to Wotton, however, had a purpose, for the address craftily framed Neville's translation as juvenilia completed in his "sixteenth year". As Evelyn Spearing rightly notes, Neville heavily revised and improved the translation and dedication before they were republished in 1581, but the *Tenne Tragedies* still represented his revised *Oedipus* as the work of the adolescent Neville (Spearing 1920, 363). Neville's vanity presumably inspired the decision to portray his younger self as a prodigy (Spearing 1920, 363). Why Newton and Marsh allowed the backdating is another question. Perhaps Neville introduced it as condition for allowing his work to be published in the collection. Or perhaps there was an advantage to depicting Neville as a young university student who was safely reading Seneca, digesting his direct meaning, and extrapolating moral principles. As a collection that sought to domesticate Seneca for novice readers, the *Tenne Tragedies* could position the young Alexander Neville as a guide, especially for the many buying their textbooks from Marsh's shop.

Furthermore, Neville's epistles model for readers how to interpret Seneca's tragedies according to a Christian framework. Within the *Tenne Tragedies*, Neville's epistles confirm Newton's contention that Seneca wrote the tragedies to denounce immorality. As Neville's dedication to Wotton explains, Seneca's tragedies "admonish all men of their fickle Estates", "declare the vnconstant head of wauering / Fortune", and "expresse the iust reuenge, and fearefull / punisheme[n]ts of horrible Crimes, wherewith the wretched / worlde in these our miserable days piteously swarmeth" (sig. L6^r, 76^r). Perhaps better than Newton himself, the translator enumerates the Godly lessons that *Oedipus* will teach, which readers will not misunderstand because Neville has taken it upon himself to amplify those passages

with his own free translations. Referring to himself in the third person, Neville writes,

[T]hough he sometimes boldly presumed to erre from his Author, rouing at random where he list: adding and subtracting at pleasure: yet let not that engender disdaynefull suspition with in thy learned breast. Marke thou rather what is ment by the whole course of the History: and frame thy lyfe free from such mischiefes, wherevwith the World at this present is vniuersally ouerwhelming, The wrathfull vengeance of God prouoked, the Body plagued, the mynde and Conscience in midst of deepe deuouring dau[n]gers most terribly assaulted. (L6^v, 76^v)

Like Newton's own dedication prefacing the *Tenne Tragedies* and Seneca's epistle reminding readers to glean lessons from a tragedy's conclusion, Neville's words here make an appeal for reading the "whole course of the History" as a means of deducing Seneca's intended meaning³⁵. Reading Neville's complete translation also ensured that readers benefited from his departures from Seneca's original, departures that the translator confesses might seem "random" but are designed to show readers how God's horrible vengeance will be exacted if they do not reform their lives.

Furthermore, if English men and women were still unsure of how to interpret *Oedipus* within Neville's Christian psychomachia, the epistle ultimately interprets it for them in a plot summary. This "Argument" is incorporated into Neville's epistle and directs readers to see Oedipus as a willful sinner rather than the pitiful puppet of Fate (Kiefer 1978, 372-87)³⁶. Neville's plot synopsis revels in Oedipus' depravity and marks his fall as "a dredfull Example of Gods horrible vengeance for sinne (sig. L7^v, 77^v). By reprinting the old epistles before *Oedipus*, Newton reminded readers half-way through the collection to read each play in its entirety. Whether young or old, the reader will be able to safely learn from the English Seneca how to "frame thy lyfe free from such mischiefs" and escape the "tragic fate of sinners" (sig. L7^v, 77^v).

35 He uses third person to describe his motives but signs the epistle "A. Neuille" (sig. L7^v, 77^v).

36 Kiefer (1978) discusses Neville's attempts to adapt the tragedy's representation of Fortune and justice to Christian ideologies.

Like Neville's epistle, Heywood's "To the Reader" prefacing *Troas* claims that departures from Seneca's text are designed for English readers:

I haue (where I thought good) with addition of myne owne Penne supplied the wante of some thynges,... for the thyrde Chorus which in Seneca beginneth thus, QVE VOCAT SEDES? For as much as nothing is therein but a heaped number of farre and straunge Countries, considerynge with my selfe, that the names of so manye vnknownen Countreyes, Mountaynes, Deserts, and Woodes, shoulde haue no grace in the Englyshe tounge, but bee a straunge and vnpleasant thinge to the Readers (excepte I should expound the Historyes of each one, which would be farre to tedious,) I haue in the place therof made another beginning, in this manner. O Ioue that leadst. &c. Which alteration may be borne withal, seyng that Chorus is no part of the substaunce of the matter. (sig. O1^v, 95^v)

Anticipating that Seneca's Chorus might be alienating to English readers, Heywood decides against translating it or explicating the geographical locales. Neither *Troas* nor any of the tragedies in Newton's volume would try to function as scholarly texts with marginal glosses or commentary³⁷. While Heywood's epistle does not explicitly state the moral of *Troas* for readers, his epistle does highlight the exact places where readers could look for one. By providing a list of interpolations, Heywood focuses readers specifically on Seneca's Choruses, which he altered to encapsulate the "substaunce of the matter" of the tragedy, which in the *Tenne Tragedies* was the warning that suffering awaits those who sin.

Whereas the First Folio depicted those who meddled with Shakespeare's text as thieves and imposters, the *Tenne Tragedies* was a work of translation that by definition required that English translators mediate Seneca's texts. Translations that veered far from their source were not considered unfaithful or inaccurate if they could capture the author's style and intended message for an audience. As Massimiliano Morini writes, for some early modern translators, "rhetorical, 'stylistic' translation often became domestication: the adaptation of the source text to one's aims and to the expectations of the target

37 Some of the earliest editions of the tragedies included extensive printed marginal notes, such as *Tragoediae Senecae cum duobus commentariis: uidelicet* (Venice, Joannes Tacuinus, 1498) and *Tragoediae* (Venice, Philippo Pincio Mantuano, 1510).

audience" (Morini 2006, 12). This practice might explain, in part, why Newton had concerns about presenting a non-Christian author to an English readership that was overwhelming Protestant, a striking departure from Lodovico Dolce's Italian translation of Seneca's tragedies in 1560, which expressed no qualms over translating Seneca for Italian readers (Terpening 1997, 92-100). Marsh clearly thought that the *Tenne Tragedies* would sell well to his clientele, and the amount of labor expended on crafting the volume into a work of moral pedagogy implies that he and Newton also had a sense of which version of "Seneca" would most appeal to readers.

Calling attention to the labors of the multiple translators encouraged readers to see the *Tenne Tragedies* as a collaborative humanist project, undertaken by a community of civic-minded scholars, for the bettering of readers' lives and the whole commonwealth of England. The early reception of the *Tenne Tragedies* tells us how readers responded to this community and the volume's pedagogical approach. After its publication, the five translators were quickly welcomed into the honor roll of English literary authors. In his *Discourse of English Poetrie* (1586), William Webbe highlights "the laudable Authors of Seneca in English (Webbe 1586, sig. C4^r). Francis Meres in *Palladis Tamia* (1598) similarly applauds the community of "translators of Senecaes Tragedies", noting that "these versifiers for their learned translations are of good note among us (Meres 1598, sig. 285^v). The 1581 collection became part of the tradition of translating the classics for the educational and moral improvement of all in the English nation. On the other end of the spectrum, it appears that English playwrights were also drawn to the *Tenne Tragedies*. Thomas Nashe famously complained that London's playmakers pilfered the "English Seneca" for "many good sentences" and "handfuls of tragical speeches", and thus "line by line and page by page" bled Seneca dry, likely a gruesome reference to Seneca's suicidal end (Nashe 1589, **3^r).

That readers also used the *Tenne Tragedies* for pedagogical purposes is clearly evident. At least one writer found the *Tenne Tragedies* a rich resource for writing for student performance. A manuscript in secretary hand, now housed at Yale's Elizabethan Club, shows a writer copying large excerpts from Neville's *Oedipus* and Newton's *Thebais* to create a five-act play entitled "a tragedy called

Oedipus" for grammar school production.³⁸ More immediate evidence in extant copies of the *Tenne Tragedies* reveals handwritten translation exercises in the margins³⁹. In the copy previously owned and signed by Thomas Tanner and now at the Bodleian Library, an annotating reader highlighted Heywood's alterations to *Hercules Furens*. This same reader also labeled passages that commented on the virtues and vices, scrawling in the margins words and phrases such as "fortitudo", "ambition", and "Virtus Est sola nobilitas". Throughout the first ten pages of *Hercules Furens*, the reader inserted whole passages from the Latin tragedy and noted the corresponding page numbers from a Latin edition, presumably one printed in Lyons by Gryphius or a paginary reprint of the same. Proving that some readers took seriously Newton's instructions on reading the volume as a whole, the antiquarian and book collector Anthony Wood recorded the *Tenne Tragedies* in his catalogue with this description: "Seneca in English— 1581,... This booke must be perused— & the epistles before every play" (Kiessling 2002, 543). If we consider that "peruse" denoted the act of wearing out a text, carefully scrutinizing it, and going through it in order, it appears that Wood may have recognized the collaborative effort on display, and instructions on how best to glean meaning from this edition of the *Tenne Tragedies*⁴⁰.

As a collection of recreational plays, Shakespeare's Folio has not been understood by scholars as a work of pedagogy, and yet, seeing how Newton and Marsh crafted the *Tenne Tragedies* to educate their readership exposes how the Folio's makers had lessons to impart to readers. To help readers believe that Shakespeare should share "a shelf with Seneca", his Folio needed to endure (Robinson 2022, 367). According to Heminge and Condell, however, preservation was dependent upon consumption: "the fate of all Bookes depends vpon your capacities: and not of your heads alone, but of your purses" (sig. pA3^r). Heminge and Condell remind readers of this truism and deliver the edict, "what euer you do, Buy". That the Folio's success

38 For a fuller description of the manuscript, see Wiggins 2011, 14.

39 See Bodleian Library, Shelfmark Tanner 784. I want to thank Colin Harris, Superintendent of Special Collections, for his assistance with this volume and other editions from the Bodleian Library.

40 "Peruse" in *OED*.

was dependent on both the intellectual and economic “capacities” of a “great Variety of Readers” remains an underlying anxiety in the collection. It is given voice once again in the second epistle:

But it is not our province, who onely gather his works, and give them you, to praise him. It is yours that reade him. And there we hope, to your divers capacities, you will finde enough, both to draw, and hold you: for his wit can no more lie hid, then it could be lost. Reade him, therefore; and againe, and againe: And if then you doe not like him, surely you are in some manifest danger, not to understand him. And so we leave you to other of his Friends, whom if you need, can be your guides: if you neede them not, you can lead yourselves, and others, and such readers we wish him. (sig. pA3^r)

These cheeky closing instructions direct readers to accept the “Shakespeare” presented in the Folio’s pages. This book will deliver what it promised, but only if readers do their part. Buying and reading the Folio is only the first step; understanding and liking the work is next.

The caveats built into the reading instructions, however, proffer other possible approaches if this “Shakespeare” fails to impress. Disliking Shakespeare is presented as the result of misreading, or being in a “manifest danger, not to vnderstand him” (sig. pA3^r). As Newton emphasized in the *Tenne Tragedies*, close and thorough reading of each and every tragedy would guarantee that readers understood Seneca’s intentions and thus not be in “great da[n]ger of infection” (sig. A3^v). Likewise, Heminge and Condell urge readers to read the Folio “againe, and againe” to apprehend Shakespeare’s literary acumen. Then, if readers were still disappointed by “Shakespeare”, they were directed to turn to “other of his Friends”, such as Jonson, Digges, Hughes, and Mabbe, as their reading “guides” (sig. pA3^r). By learning about Shakespeare from these writers, and trusting the community of experts who celebrate the author, readers are expected to acquire admiration for Shakespeare. Like the English “fellowes” who domesticated Seneca’s tragedies by translating them and highlighting their Godly teachings, the “guides” to the Folio through their commendatory poems will help readers find worth in Shakespeare’s plays. The future of the First Folio depended on a pedagogical process. Readers who appreciate the author must lead other readers to this same understanding, and those admirers of the book, will in turn, accept their instructional role,

and on and on. The “Shakespeare” who triumphed as a dramatic author based on his own natural talents will only live on if readers cultivate more readers.

Nonetheless, a nagging concern about customers’ reading abilities remains in Heminge and Condell’s address. They jestingly allude to the range of potential buyers, “[f]rom the most able, to him that can but spell”, but these words imply that poor literacy skills could affect the success of “Shakespeare”, preventing customers from buying the collection in the first place (sig. pA3^r). Forty-two years earlier, Newton expressed a similar uneasiness, not just because Seneca’s tragedies were now accessible to a much larger readership, but also because he seemed to question whether vernacular readers knew how to read a play. In *Typographies of Performance*, Claire M.L. Bourne demonstrates how early printed drama taught readers how to apprehend printed plays, which required a different set of literacy skills than non-dramatic works (Bourne 2020, 59). That, in 1581, Newton and Marsh perceived that their readers might need assistance with making sense of playtexts is evident. As noted above, Newton uses his dedication to explain simple principles about reading drama, such as the significance of reading lines in the context of their plot and setting and reading the whole play to its conclusion. The typographic cues and epistles directing readers to specific arguments and choruses served the function of accommodating novice playreaders, perhaps even those who were seeing a printed play for the first time⁴¹.

By the 1590s, there were enough English playreaders to fund a substantial and growing market for English playbooks, and it seems worth considering whether the *Tenne Tragedies* helped create this customer base. Indeed, if one counts the plays in English that were printed before 1581, including the Seneca translations in individual editions, the number is twenty-four; if we discount the early Seneca editions, the number drops to eighteen⁴². Noting that the 1581 collec-

41 On reading the English tragedies, see Green 1990, 73.

42 According to DEEP. *Andria* [1520], *The Summoning of Everyman* [1534], *Troas* (1559, [1562?]), *Thyestes* (1560), *Hercules Furens* (1561), *Oedipus* (1563), *Gorboduc* (1565, 1570), *Agamemnon* (1566), *Medea* (1566), *Octavia* [1566], *Damon and Pithias* (1571), *Supposes* (1573, [1575]), *Jocasta* (1573, [1575]), *Free-Will* [1573?], *Appius and Virginia* (1573), *Gammer Gurton’s Needle* (1575), *The Glass of Government* (1575), *The Tide*

tion was comprised of ten tragedies, more than half of the eighteen available non-Senecan plays in the English market, we might come to the conclusion that the English Seneca was instrumental in helping vernacular readers learn or develop their play-reading skills. Granted, there were many options for readers to acquire dramatic literacy from other dramatic genres, such as English interludes, entertainments, masques, and dialogues. However, the plays in the *Tenne Tragedies* introduced features particular to “plays”, such as acts, scenes, choruses, arguments, and other classically-styled dramatic devices. A volume with ten such plays surely had some effects on dramatic literacy in the period, although there is no way to quantify that influence. What we can say is that by 1623, the publishers of the First Folio anticipated that there were enough readers of plays to ensure a return on their investment.

As two of the earliest multi-text collections of English plays printed on English soil, the *Tenne Tragedies* and the Shakespeare First Folio went well beyond establishing the print legacies of their “Authors”. By teaching English people to read plays, these collections participated in an ongoing pedagogical process that may have inspired entire generations of playreaders to share their knowledge and enthusiasm for English drama *ad infinitum*.

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Tarrieth No Man (1575), *Common Conditions* [1576], *Abraham’s Sacrifice* (1577), *All for Money* (1578), 1 & 2 *Promos and Cassandra* (1578). If we include all plays, interludes, disputes, entertainments, and masques printed before 1581, the number comes approximately seventy-five.

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Domesticating Seneca

Stephen Orgel

From the late seventeenth century, Seneca has had a bad press in England. Heavily rhetorical and declamatory, the plays were repeatedly declared unsuited to the stage. For the Elizabethan and Jacobean theater, however, Seneca was a model for drama, an essential resource. The plays were taught in school, and translations of all ten plays attributed to Seneca appeared between 1560 and 1581. Not only the early Shakespeare, especially *Titus Andronicus*, but even plays like *King Lear* and *Othello* reflect Seneca's influence. This is largely invisible to us because our way of performing Shakespeare renders soliloquies meditative rather than declamatory, and strives for naturalism rather than stylization.

Keywords: *Oedipus*, Seneca, Translation, Revenge, Performance

I

For modern drama, the essential classic model of tragedy has been Sophocles's *Oedipus Tyrannos*, largely under the influence of Freud. The drama of unperceived guilt, forbidden desire, and revelation has seemed to us to have a universal application. Moreover, Aristotle in the *Poetics* uses the play several times as a model for tragedy, confirming its timeless relevance. To the Renaissance, however, the Oedipus story looked quite different from the version we derive from Sophocles and Freud. Its center was not the supplanting of the father in the mother's bed, but the defeat of the murderous sphinx through the solving of a riddle – a characteristic gloss on Oedipus from 1613 is “a riddle-reader of Thebes”: that was the essential Oedipus (du Bartas 1613, sig. Iii7v). In fact, Sophocles's play was not widely known in Renaissance England (nor was Aristotle's *Poetics*). Versions of the story were based principally on the mythographers, and the dramatic source was Seneca's *Oedipus*, not Sophocles's. Sophocles came late to England: the first English translation of a Sophocles play was Charles

Wase's *Electra*, published in 1649, with a dedication to Charles I's daughter Elizabeth – in the year of the king's execution, the play had an obvious political relevance. The first English Sophocles appeared only in the eighteenth century¹.

Seneca, however, was studied by English schoolboys throughout the sixteenth century, and translations of the plays were published from the mid-century onward. It was Seneca who provided the model for tragedy; the first English *Oedipus* to be based on Sophocles rather than Seneca was John Dryden and Nathaniel Lee's version of 1679, which was both hugely popular and criticized for being too bloodthirsty. Indeed, although it follows the plot, in the course of adapting Sophocles to the Restoration stage it violates all the classical canons, and not only that of time. It concludes with a number of violent murders committed onstage – including, once, an actual one: at a performance in 1692, the actor playing Creon mistakenly used a real dagger instead of a retractable one, and mortally wounded the actor playing Adrastus. (Dramatically, this was a multiple error: in the play, Adrastus kills Creon, and is himself killed by soldiers.) In fact, Dryden and Lee were no closer to Sophocles than to Seneca.

For the English, in short, Sophocles was an eighteenth – and nineteenth-century dramatist – and, of course, an uncompromisingly modern one. Nevertheless, even to modern eyes *Oedipus* sometimes hit too close to home. When the death of Polybus, whom Oedipus believes to be his father, is revealed, Jocasta says “fear not that you will wed your mother. Many men before now have slept with their mothers in dreams” (*Oedipus* 980-81, trans. R. C. Jebb) – the Oedipus complex for Sophocles was not some deeply buried secret, but plain common knowledge. Yeats translating the play in 1928, however, omitted the passage – Sophocles was too Freudian

1 An anonymous 1715 translation of *Oedipus King of Thebes* appears to have been by Lewis Theobald. The publisher Jacob Lintott had commissioned a complete Sophocles translation by Theobald in 1715, but if it was delivered it was never issued; an *Electra* and an *Oedipus King of Thebes* were, however, published anonymously in 1714 and 1715, and reprinted respectively in 1780 and 1765 credited to Theobald. See Walton 2009, 103-10. For the medieval legend of Gregorius modeled on Oedipus, see Aue, Zeydel and Morgan 1955; and also Mann 1951. A complete Sophocles translation by George Adams appeared in 1729, and one by Thomas Francklin in 1758.

for Yeats. The Oedipus story, in fact, has for us required a good deal of interpretation and adaptation; if Yeats found it shocking, modern taste tends to find it uncomfortably tame. Peter Brook, staging Ted Hughes's translation of Seneca's *Oedipus* in 1968, at the play's climax had the cast parade through the audience in the wake of a giant phallus, celebrating Oedipus's expulsion from Thebes by singing "Yes, we have no bananas"². It was a celebration of Oedipus's expulsion, but also a jolt to the audience's expectations for a solemn final catharsis, and a reminder of the purported fertility ritual roots of classical tragedy.

Dryden in his *Oedipus* explains the decision to turn for a source to Sophocles rather than Seneca by criticizing Seneca's rhetorical elaboration, "always running after pompous expression, pointed sentences, and Philosophical notions, more proper for the Study than the Stage". (Dryden and Lee 1679, Preface, sig. A2v). This quality, however, was precisely what the sixteenth century (and Roman readers) prized in Seneca. Dryden and Lee duly added to Sophocles what their stage required, not only the concluding blinding and deaths but a good deal of stage business, including two appearances of the ghost of Laius, guilt made manifest, with appropriately ominous effects: "Peal of Thunder; and flashes of Lightning; then groaning below the stage" (38).

II

Despite the pervasiveness of the classics in education, the English produced relatively little in the way of classical scholarship during the sixteenth century. The only editions of Greek drama published in England were Euripides's *Trojan Women*, published by John Day in 1575, and Aristophanes's *Knights* published by Joseph Barnes in 1593. In the 1550s Jane, Lady Lumley translated Euripides's *Iphigenia in Aulis* into prose – the translation was apparently done with the

2 Hughes did not know Latin, and relied on a prose translation provided to the National Theatre by David Turner, and on the nineteenth-century American translation of Frank Justus Miller published in the Loeb Library Seneca. Hughes was apparently embarrassed by his lack of classical learning, and repeatedly lied about it, but his copy of the Loeb Seneca shows the English translation copiously annotated and not a mark on the Latin text. See Stead 2013, 88-104.

assistance of Erasmus's Latin version³. It remained unpublished until 1909. George Peele translated one of the *Iphigenia* plays, which was performed by Paul's Boys sometime in the 1570s, and is now lost. The first translation of a Greek play to be published in English was George Gascoigne and Francis Kinwelmersh's *Jocasta*, a version of Euripides's *Trojan Women*, performed in 1566 and printed in 1573. The authors do certainly purport to be translating Euripides – their title reads *Jocasta: A Tragedie writte in Greeke by Euripides. Translated and digested into Acte, by George Gascoigne and Francis Kinwelmersh* – though in fact they are working quite faithfully from a recent Italian version by Lodovico Dolce, which itself is based on a Latin translation. Queen Elizabeth studied Greek with Roger Ascham and was said to have translated a play of Euripides, of which nothing more is known. Considering the prestige of Greek in the educational system the lack of editions may seem surprising, but texts published on the continent were easily available, and presumably English publishers did not anticipate a sufficient market to justify domestic editions.

The works here cited joined a very small number of translations and adaptations of classical drama throughout the sixteenth century in England. Thomas Watson's Latin *Antigone* appeared in 1581; the play had apparently been performed – Gabriel Harvey saw it in London, or perhaps in Cambridge. A Latin edition of Seneca's *Hercules Furens* was published by Henry Sutton in 1561. As for English translations, in 1533 Roger Ascham compiled his *Floures of Latine Spekyng* out of Terence; the Roman dramatist was here treated as a basis not for domestic drama but for Latin conversation – the volume became a standard school text, and was reprinted throughout the century. The interlude *Jack Juggler*, published in 1565, declares itself based on the *Amphitruo* of Plautus; and the other mid-century comedies *Gammer Gurton's Needle* and *Ralph Roister Doister* are similarly modeled on Roman comedy. All ten of the plays attributed to Seneca were published in translation between 1560 and 1581. *Gorboduc*, the most overtly Senecan of sixteenth-century plays in English, is in fact Senecan only on the page: in performance it was punctuated by long dumb-shows between the acts; thus to a spectator, it would have looked very much like a traditional English tragedy. A translation of Plautus's *Menaechmi* by one "W.W." was issued in

3 See Greene 1941, 537-47; Findlay 2014, 133-201.

1595 by Thomas Creede, who advertised it as “chosen purposely from out the rest, as least harmefull, and yet most delightfull”⁴.

For Renaissance England the key Senecan drama was not *Oedipus*, with its focus on individual guilt, responsibility, and self-knowledge, but *Thyestes*, the tragedy of endless and inexorable revenge. The English taste for revenge drama was especially powerful in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries; and in fact, one might say that, for the history of theater as its surviving examples allow us to construct it, revenge is the originary subject of drama, and is perhaps the reason drama exists at all. Aeschylus’s *Oresteia* trilogy, in showing how society has moved beyond revenge, acknowledged revenge to be a perpetual subject. The final play in the sequence, *The Eumenides*, shows individual revenge being aborted by the gods and judicial punishment reserved to the state; but this conclusion meant that individual revenge could therefore never be satisfied. One social solution beginning in the Middle Ages was the institutionalization of duelling, a practice that continued almost till modern times despite continued official attempts to suppress it. We may also feel that revenge was endemic in an age when resentment was an inescapable consequence of the political system – indeed, perhaps this is true of any political system: some group always has to lose.

Dryden’s pejorative account of the rhetorical character of Senecan drama has been on the whole the predominant one, supported by the assumption that the plays were written not for performance but for declamation. This appears to be the case; the evidence for it is both negative and positive. There are no ancient references to the plays being performed and no Roman actors celebrated for their interpretations of Senecan roles; and the heavily rhetorical nature of the plays themselves seems to preclude performance. But as I have argued elsewhere, only the former evidence is really persuasive; the latter reflects only changes in taste, and suggests, on the contrary, that Renaissance performances of Senecan plays were perfectly feasible. I am here quoting myself: James I’s favorite play, George Ruggle’s *Ignoramus*, presented before him twice at Clare College, Cambridge, has very long speeches in Latin and took six hours to perform. Walter Montagu’s *The Shepherd’s Paradise*, written for performance by Queen Henrietta Maria

4 For a more detailed account, see Orgel 2021.

and her ladies, had even longer speeches in English. There were complaints about the length from the aristocratic performers, but only the queen's opinion mattered, and the project went ahead. It was eventually performed in a somewhat cut version, but still lasted "seven or eight hours", according to a member of the audience writing after midnight on the night of the event⁵. In both these cases, taste is an issue, but popular taste is not – and if Nero had wanted to see Seneca's plays performed, they would have been performed⁶.

For English readers, T. S. Eliot made Seneca respectable again with two essays, "Seneca in Elizabethan Translation" and "Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca," both published in 1927. These essays on the whole adhere to the traditional view of the heavily rhetorical Seneca, but diverge from it in conceiving Senecan rhetoric a strength, not a weakness. Nevertheless, crucial points depend not on the power of Senecan declamation, but on sudden extremely economical *coups de théâtre*:

Antony says, "I am Antony still," and the Duchess, "I am Duchess of Malfy still"; would either of them have said that unless Medea had said *Medea superest?* (Medea survives). (Eliot 1950b, 113.)

Elsewhere Eliot cites the "shock" of Jason's final lines in *Medea*:

*Per alta vada spatia sublimi aethere,
Testare nullos esse, qua veheris, deos.* (Eliot 1950a, 59.)
(Go through the high reaches of thin air,
Bear witness that where you fly there are no gods.)

(Or "Bear witness where you fly that there are no gods": the Latin may be construed either way; does the play conclude by denying all religion?) There is, too, the often quoted response of Thyestes to his brother Atreus, serving Thyestes's murdered sons to him at a bloody banquet:

ATREUS
natos ecquid agnoscis tuos?
THYESTES
Agnosco fratrem. (Seneca 1917, 1005-06)

5 John Beaulieu to Sir Thomas Puckering, January 10, 1632/3. Birch 1848, 2:216.

6 For the full argument, see Orgel 2021, 129-32.

(ATREUS
 Do you indeed recognize your sons?
 THYESTES
 I recognize my brother.)

Arguably, however, the power of these moments depends precisely on their brevity within the surrounding rhetoric. Suddenly the orators are left without words.

III

Early Shakespearean tragedy is imbued with Seneca, as the long rhetorical passages in the *Henry VI* trilogy and in *Richard III* testify. But the most obviously Senecan Shakespeare play is *Titus Andronicus*. The fortunes of this tragedy, indeed, parallel the fortunes of Seneca in the critical literature. In its own time it was one of Shakespeare's most popular plays, the first to be published, in 1594, reissued four times before 1640, translated into Dutch and German and performed on the continent. It is also the only Shakespeare play of which a depiction survives from his lifetime, the Peacham drawing, dating anywhere from 1595 to 1614-15⁷. However, the play barely survived the closing of the theaters; Edward Ravenscroft, adapting it to the post-restoration stage, declared it "the most incorrect and indigested piece in all [Shakespeare's] works [...] rather a heap of Rubbish then a Structure" and considered it unlikely that Shakespeare had in fact written it. Ravenscroft revived it, he said, in the wake of the Popish Plot, to show "the treachery of Villains, and the Mischiefs carry'd on by Perjury, and False Evidence; and how Rogues may frame a Plot that shall deceive and destroy both the Honest and the Wise". In doing so, however, Ravenscroft declared that he had greatly improved the drama:

Compare the Old Play with this, you'l finde that none in all that Authors Works ever receiv'd greater Alterations or Additions, the Language not only refin'd, but many Scenes entirely New: Besides most of the principal Characters heighten'd, and the Plot much encreas'd.

7 See Jonathan Bate's discussion in Bate 1995, 38-43.

The reviser's efforts were duly rewarded: "The Success answer'd the Labour"; despite "the foolish and Malicious part of the Nation [...] it bore up against the Faction and is confirm'd a Stock-Play," (Ravenscroft 1687, sig. A2r-v.), performed regularly (though in fact not often) as part of the acting company's repertoire.

Titus Andronicus has no known source; nevertheless it is a very literary play. At its center is a book; the story of Philomela, Procne, and Tereus in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* is both a model for action and a principle of explanation. The heroine Lavinia, deprived of the power of speech, locates the Philomela story in a copy of Ovid, and names her attackers in writing. The concluding act of revenge, the sons served up to their parents at a banquet, comes directly from Seneca's *Thyestes*. Instead of the Senecan linguistic *coups de théâtre* of the "Agnosco fratrem" sort, the play stages a mounting series of outrages – murders, mutilations, severed limbs, beheadings, finally the cannibal banquet. These were not subtle, but they undeniably made for exciting theater. Moreover, the contradictory qualities that for later ages rendered the play unsophisticated were surely for its original audiences high points of the drama: the long, passionate, heavily ornate speeches of Aaron, Tamora, and Titus, and especially Marcus's famous extended ekphrasis upon discovering the mutilated Lavinia:

Alas, a crimson river of warm blood,
Like to a bubbling fountain stirred with wind,
Doth rise and fall between thy rosèd lips...
(*Titus Andronicus*, II.iii.21ff.)⁸.

For modern readers and directors these speeches are a theatrical problem: what happens onstage during all this rhetoric; what is Lavinia to do while Marcus declaims? The speech continues for almost fifty lines. But surely this is just the sort of thing Shakespeare's audiences came to hear: passionate, ornate oratory. The point is made succinctly by an illustration in G. P. Trapolin's tragedy *Antigone* of 1581 (Figure 1).

8 Quotations from *Titus Andronicus* are from Bate 1995.

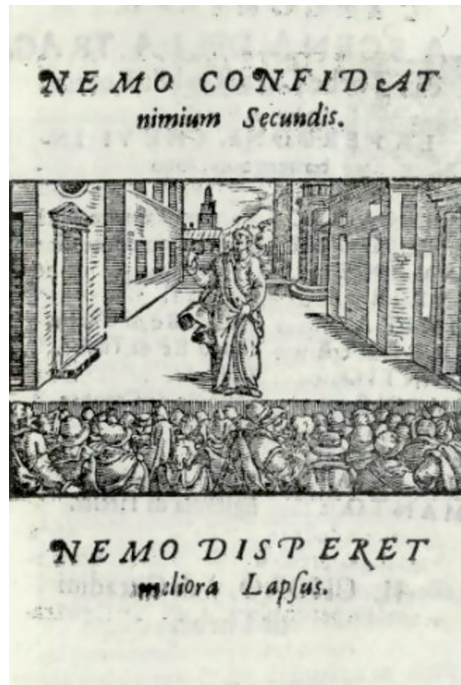


Fig. 1 G. P. Trapolin, the Chorus in *Antigone: tragedia* (Padova, 1581), p. 8. Folger Shakespeare Library, 169-641q.

A choral figure stands at the front of the stage addressing the audience – there is no “fourth wall,” and despite the perspective setting, no pretense of realism. The motto of the image is a quotation from Seneca’s *Thyestes*,

Let no one be too sure of good fortune, Let no one despair that better will not come. (Seneca 1917, 614-15. Author’s translation)

Peter Brook’s famous production of *Titus Andronicus* in 1957, starring Laurence Olivier and Vivien Leigh, dealt with the theatrical problem simply by cutting Marcus’s speech. Jonathan Bate, in the Arden 3 edition of the play, defends the cut by saying that Brook replaced it with some stylized pantomime, but it is clear that Brook simply did not trust the text. Brook also, surely disingenuously, expressed surprise that critics had praised him for saving a bad play, asserting that “it had not occurred to any of us in rehearsal that the play was so bad” (Bate, ed. 1995, 1). Presumably nobody in the company had

read any Shakespeare criticism either; Eliot was echoing centuries of critical contempt when he declared *Titus* “one of the stupidest and most uninspired plays ever written, a play in which it is incredible that Shakespeare had any hand at all” (Eliot 1950a, 67). Ravenscroft’s strictures, cited above, were standard from the late seventeenth century to the mid-twentieth.

The fact that the play is no longer considered bad is surely due in large measure to the success of Brook’s production. By 1971, the distinguished classical scholar Reuben Brower could call *Titus Andronicus* “the perfect exhibit of a typical Roman play” (Brower 1971, 173) – clearly it no longer needed a defense. Marcus’s ekphrasis, in fact, is profoundly revealing about the nature of Shakespeare’s stage. It not only parallels and glosses the action, it effectively pre-empts it:

But sure some Tereus hath deflowered thee
And, lest thou shouldst detect him, cut thy tongue.
(*Titus Andronicus*, II.iii.26-7)

Marcus makes the connection with the Tereus/Philomela story immediately. Lavinia later finding the passage in Ovid merely confirms his perception. Language here is both action and interpretation.

The drama itself is as much writing as action, and in fact, the written word is strikingly emphasized throughout the play. Much of the plotting depends on letters: Aaron’s forged letter about Bassianus’s death, the letters shot to heaven by Titus’s sons, Titus’s threatening letter delivered by the clown, even Aaron’s extraordinary claim to have dug up corpses and carved on their skins “in Roman letters, ‘Let not your sorrow die’” (V.i.140). The Roman letters are there to serve as an eternal reproach specifically to Romans; but the tragic admonition is addressed as well to the literate spectators: English Renaissance education was conducted largely in Latin; moreover, English, of course, is written in Roman letters. Bodies here become texts, just as Lavinia with her tongue cut out is immediately identified as a literary allusion. Demetrius and Chiron knowingly “re-write” the Tereus and Philomela *locus classicus* by cutting off Lavinia’s hands as well as her tongue, to prevent her from weaving or embroidering a representation of her rape and mutilation, as Philomela does in *Metamorphoses* VI.

Writing in the play is both action and testimony, and handwriting is always implicitly believed. All Saturninus has to do is show Titus a letter to convince him that his sons are guilty of Bassianus's murder. But letters in Shakespeare are as likely as not to be forged: if handwriting constitutes proof, it also as easily constitutes perjury. What, then, is the real truth of drama? Tamora says that Titus found the letter proving his sons' guilt, and he agrees that he did (II.ii.294-95); but in fact he did not – this is a case where the character (i.e. the text) lies about the action we have seen taking place. The play follows its own rules, and rewrites itself. What, then, is the truth? Aaron's villainy has been self-evident throughout the play, but it only becomes evident to the other characters when a soliloquy of his is overheard – and even this is reported, not dramatized. This is a little epitome of theater: what actors do, after all, is not perform actions but recite lines from scripts. And what audiences know is only what is addressed to them and what they overhear.

Seneca wrote *Thyestes* for an audience that already knew the plot; it turned a familiar narrative into drama. *Titus Andronicus*, a play without a source, constituted a series of unexpected calamities – until, of course, a spectator returned to see it again; for surely its popularity indicates that audiences saw it over and over. Shakespearean drama in this way created its own history.

IV

Tastes change, and theatrical tastes change rapidly. Jasper Heywood's translation of *Thyestes*, adapting Latin hexameters to English fourteeners, maintains the verse rhythm rigidly, with no variation for dramatic effect. Here, in modern typography, is Heywood's version of the "*agnosco fratrem*" moment:

THYESTES

...Whence murmure they?

ATREUS

With fathers armes embrace them quickly nowe,

For here they are loe come to thee: dooste thou thy children knowe?

THYESTES

I know my brother: suche a gylt yet canst thou suffre well

ô earth to beare? nor yet from hence to Stygian lake of hell...

([Newton] 1581, fol. 37^v.)

The revelation is buried in the metrics. Figure 2 shows this moment as it appears in the original edition of 1560. The typography effectively hides the rhetorical *coup*. In Thomas Newton's edition of 1581 (Figure 3), the regularity of the typography is even more constraining. In contrast, Figure 4 shows the same moment translated a century later by John Wright, with the drama radically distorting the verse.

**Come neere my loons, for you now dooth
 th' unhappie father call:
 Come neere, for you once seene, this grieffe
 wolde soone asswage and fall.
 Whence murmure they? At. with fathers armes
 embrace them quickly nowe,
 For here they are loe come to thee:
 doste thou thy childzen knowe?
 Thy. I know my brother: suche a gylt
 yet canst thou suffre well
 O earth to beare? noz yet from henc
 to Stygian lake of hell**

Fig. 2 Heywood 1560, fol. D8^r (detail). Huntington Library, San Marino, CA, 5196.

Thiestes
 What quakes within with heauy payse I feele my selfe opprest,
 And with an other voyce then myne bewayles my doleful brest:
 Come nere my loons, for you now dooth th' unhappy father call:
 Come nere, for you once seene, this grieffe would soone asswage & fall
 Whence murmure they? At. w. fathers armes embrace them quickly nowe
 For here they are loe come to thee: dost thou thy childzen knowe?
 Th. I know my brother: such a gylt yet canst thou suffer well
 O earth to beare? noz yet from henc to Stygian lake of hell
 Dost thou both drowne thy selfe and vs? noz yet with brooken ground
 Dost thou these kingdomes and their king with Chaos rude confounde?

Fig. 3 [Newton] 1581, fol. 37^v (detail).

Thy. What tumult shakes me thus with-
 in? My breast
 Is with a sad impatient weight oppress'd:
 Sad groans I with a voice not mine respire.
 Appear my Sons, your most unhappy fire
 Bids you appear: your sight alone will cure
 This grief. — Whence answer they?
At. — — — Make ready your
 (*Shews the Heads*)
 Embraces: they are come, — Now Sir, do
 ye know
 Your Sons? —
At. I know my Brother. — Canst thou
 undergo,
 Dull earth, such wickedness, & bear it thus?

Fig. 4 Wright 1684, 87.

John Crowne's contemporary play *Thyestes* (1681) is not a translation of Seneca, and therefore is not bound by Seneca's dramaturgy, but, except for an added love-plot between Thyestes's son, here named Philisthenes, and an invented daughter of Atreus named Antigone, it follows Seneca's narrative closely. Crowne's revelation of the murder of Philisthenes (in the play Thyestes has only one son) is conveyed not by rhetoric, but by stage effects, as the father consumes wine mixed with his son's blood: "Thyestes drinks; a clap of Thunder, the Table oversets, and falls in pieces; all the lights go out" (Crowne 1681, 49). As for Ravenscroft's *Titus Andronicus*, though the drama is heavily rationalized and the language, as Ravenscroft says, "refined", the climax is nevertheless far more bloodthirsty than Shakespeare's, including, as a backdrop to the banquet, Aaron the Moor being tortured on the rack and stubbornly refusing to confess his villainy.

V

Revenge tragedy was an enormously popular genre partly through satisfying the sadistic tastes of the audience – this was, after all, the same audience for which public executions constituted both a moral spectacle and entertainment – but probably equally because it provided a new kind of protagonist, the hero/villain, the justified murderer. Since as a Christian you believed that murder was never justified and vengeance belonged only to God, Elizabethan revenge plays always have it both ways: they serve as moral sermons on the evils of revenge – the revenger does always lose in the end (though you might say he dies happy) – but audiences have the pleasure of seeing the revenge enacted. The effect is achieved, however, not through the moralizing effects of the drama – nobody in *Titus Andronicus* argues against revenge except Tamora, who is obviously being disingenuous – but through all the action that works against the morality: the thrill of horror at the cunningly planned murders, the actual, physical shock of the violence and its attendant blood, the emotional satisfaction at seeing the villains paid off – these are the most direct effects the plays work with.

In 1589 Thomas Nashe, in his preface to Robert Greene's *Menaphon*, sneered at playwrights "that could scarcelie latinize their neckeverse if they should have neede" – prisoners condemned to be hanged could save their necks by reading a Latin verse, thus showing that they were literate; but these playwrights were not even that literate in Latin.

Nevertheless, Nashe continues,

English *Seneca* read by candle light yeeldes manie good sentences, as *Bloud is a begger*, and so foorth: and if you intreate him faire in a frostie morning, he will affoord you whole *Hamlets*, I should say handfulls of tragical speaches. (in Smith 1904, 1.312.)

Uneducated playwrights find plenty of good Senecan effects in translation; and the particular example is *Hamlet*, which Nashe finds especially egregious. There was, then, a *Hamlet* being performed in 1589 that sounded like Seneca – the *Hamlet* familiar to us dates from 1601. The old play must have been popular, since it appears again in the theater manager Philip Henslowe's records as still being performed in 1594. This *Hamlet* was long credited to Thomas Kyd be-

cause Nashe's account makes it sound like *The Spanish Tragedy*, but it is now widely considered to be a very early version of the play by Shakespeare, surviving in some form in the first quarto of *Hamlet*, published in 1603⁹. Did Shakespeare, then, read his Seneca in translation? Many years later Ben Jonson, the most learned of English poets, would write of Shakespeare that he had "small Latin and less Greek" – did Shakespeare's Latin not extend as far as the Seneca studied in school? In that case, Shakespeare's Seneca was the Seneca of Jasper Heywood and the other translators published by Thomas Newton in *Seneca His Tenne Tragedies, Translated into English* in 1581.

Hamlet appears to us more ruminative than declamatory, but that is largely a consequence of our way of performing it. When Hamlet delivers his soliloquies on the modern stage he does so as if he is thinking aloud, speaking only to himself. In the beautiful 1948 film, Olivier's Hamlet did not even speak the speeches, but remained lost in thought while the soliloquies were recited in a voice-over. But look again at the actor in Figure 1, the Chorus in a sixteenth-century tragedy: he is at the front of the stage, addressing the audience directly. The Hamlet of 1601 did not think his soliloquies, he declaimed them, arguing, haranguing, justifying himself, persuading the audience of the rightness of his cause and the wickedness of his enemies. Indeed, he accuses himself of overdoing it, "cursing like a very drab". If we think about performing styles, the declamatory Seneca is manifest not merely in the early Shakespeare of *Henry VI* and *Richard III*, but in the tremendous invective of *King Lear* and *Coriolanus*, the passion of *Othello*, both Prospero's rages and his philosophizing.

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9 Bourus 2014 – following, notably, Cairncross 1936 – makes a persuasive case for the first quarto of *Hamlet* being the ur-*Hamlet*, a view shared by, among others, Harold Bloom, Hardin Craig, Peter Alexander, and myself. See also Urkowitz 1992, 257-291; Serpieri 1997.

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Seneca's Metamorphoses, from Chaucer to Shakespeare

Dominique Goy-Blanquet

The Roman author of tragedies entered the Italian, French and English stages through the works of jurists. Lawyers, law and judgment played a significant part in his progress through the Middle Ages down to Shakespeare, down to us now through layers of time and critical approaches. How far Seneca influenced the English playwright, from the shrill calls for revenge of the early plays to the later debates on justice, in trial scenes performed before audiences playing judge and jury, that remains the question to be discussed here.

Keywords: Lawyers, Playwrights, Chroniclers, Politics, *Pro et contra* pleas, Ghosts, Revenge, Translation

Under the Tudor reigns, members of the Inns of Court presented the public with three works that made significant contributions to the shaping of Elizabethan drama: Edward Hall's *Union of the two noble and illustre famelies of Lancastre and Yorke*, *The Mirror for Magistrates* by William Baldwin and fellow Inns members, and *Seneca His Tenne Tragedies* collected by Thomas Newton. The earliest of these works, Hall's chronicle, provided material to the authors of the *Mirror for Magistrates*, and decades later to Shakespeare's *Henriads*.

Inns Writers and Squeamish Readers

Jasper Heywood has just published *Troas* when he is requested in a dream by Seneca's ghost to translate more of his plays, and directs him to the Inns of Court where "finest witts doe swarme". His list of 'Minervaes men' ends with "Baldwyns worthie name / Whose Myrrour dothe of Magistrates proclayme eternall fame" (Heywood 1560). Of the eight young men he cites as deserving praise for their works of poetry and translation, Baldwin, North, Sackville, Norton,

Thomas Blundeville, Christopher Yelverton, William Bavand and Barnabe Googe, six were Inns members (De Vocht, ed. 1878). So were George Ferrers, Alexander Neville, John Studley, George Gascoigne, Francis Kinwelmarsh (Conley 1927, 133). And Heywood himself, who entered Gray's Inn in 1561.

That Seneca's plays should find translators, adaptors and admirers in the community of the Inns is no accident (Winston 2006). Several are explorations of cases, pleas *pro et contra* presented to the audience in expectation of their verdict: Medea, for one, puts her case "to the nurse, to Creon, to Jason, and above all to herself" (Costa in Seneca 1973, 9). A lawyer himself, Seneca perfected his talent for oratory in court, where he pleaded *pro bono* before his exile. He was also a counsellor whose advice went unheeded, as portrayed in *Octavia*. With a little mending his works could still act as "glasses of governance" in the present turmoils of Tudor monarchy. "The common law system was based on precedents imparting valuable and applicable lessons to the present", Michael Ullyot notes: in the uncertain early years of Elizabeth's reign, Norton and Sackville "had every reason to believe that the realm's peace and stability relied on the counsel of its common lawyers" (Ullyot 2008, 106, 110) when they presented the Queen with a historical subject set in the structure and mood of Senecan tragedy.

The early Elizabethan translators did not design Seneca's plays for performance, and did not immediately inspire playwrights, even though they may well have lit the way. Shortly after the publication of *Troas*, two co-authors of the *Mirror* made the leap from didactic literature to stage with the representation of the first Elizabethan tragedy, *Gorboduc*, "clyming to the height of Seneca his style" (Sidney 1595, sig. 14v.), in Sidney's tepid tribute, though sadly ignorant of Aristotle's principles. Sidney's learned circle were working at the time to promote the neo-classical plays of Robert Garnier, also a lawyer, King Henri III's advocate general at the Parlement de Paris. A member of the circle, Thomas Kyd, stood at the crossroads of cultural traditions, with a translation of Garnier's *Cornélie*, and his own popular *Spanish Tragedie*.

Seven plays, translated by four different writers, had already appeared in print when Newton published *Seneca His Tenne Tragedies* in 1581, possibly "to serve as an English equivalent to collected continental editions of Seneca's tragedies" (Mayne 2019, 837). In his

Epistle Dedicatory, Newton mentions the “squeymish Areopagites” who judge and reject Seneca’s plays on moral grounds, fearing infection. He requests the readers, as he would jurymen, “with no forestalled judgment, to mark and consider the circumstaunces, why, where, & by what maner of persons such sentences are pronounced”, for then equity cannot but lead them to a more favourable resolution. Indeed, he pleads, Seneca’s sublimity and loftiness of style, far from countenancing Vice, “beateth down sinne, loose lyfe, dissolute dealing, and unbridled sensuality” and “bytingly layeth down the guerdon of filthy lust, cloaked dissimulation and odious treachery” (Newton in Seneca 1927, 4-5)¹.

Modern and post-modern scholars often sound equally squeamish when they look for philosophical, ethical or political motives to justify Seneca’s gory theatre of cruelty. Curtis Perry works to unsettle “conventional wisdom about Shakespeare and early modernity”, lashing at romantic-era criticism and other entrenched forces of the Shakespeare industry: “our understanding of Shakespeare’s engagement with Seneca has been distorted by centuries of critical disdain”, which made the Latin playwright “somewhat embarrassing as a potential resource for the bard” (Perry 2021, 2-3)². The embarrassment was already patent among his early translators, and not restricted to Seneca, but extended to ‘all things Italian’ since the Reformation.

Heywood had made alterations to *Troas* because the work seemed to him “in some places unperfit, whether left so of the Author, or parte of it loste, as tyme devoureth all thinges”. His Argument vows to recite in English the woes of Troy, rather than its ten years of siege, “For I the mothers teares must here complayne, / And blood of babes, that giltles have bene slayne” (Heywood, *The Argument, Troas*, in Seneca 1927, 7). The introduction to a nineteenth-century facsimile reprint of the *Tenne Tragedies* notes among the liberties taken by Heywood

1 Newton’s Original Dedication to Sir Thomas Henneage of *Seneca His Tenne Tragedies* (1581), reprinted with an introduction by T. S. Eliot (Seneca 1927). Unless otherwise stated, all references here are to this now rare edition, with grateful thanks to the Bibliothèque universitaire de Lorraine for lending me their copy at the request of the Bibliothèque de la Sorbonne.

2 Despite a declared interest in the evolution of European drama, his bibliography seldom extends beyond anglophone research.

the addition of Achilles' ghost, drawn straight from the legends in *The Mirror for Magistrates*, and in *Thyestes* of a soliloquy calling all the torments of hell on Atreus, full of "nauseous bombast, which not only violates the laws of criticism, but provokes the abhorrence of our common sensibilities" (Leigh ed., Seneca 1887, iv)³.

T. S. Eliot, who attempts "what redemption of his fate is possible" had a simple explanation for Seneca's horrors: his plays were "admirably adapted for declamation before an imperial highbrow audience of crude sensibility but considerable sophistication in the ingenuities of language": many of his faults "which appear 'decadent' are, after all, merely Roman" (Eliot, Intr. to Seneca 1927, viii, ix, xii). A judgment presumably applicable to the Elizabethan readers of the *Tenne Tragedies*. Eliot is right in one respect: the worst horrors depicted in Seneca's plays, like those shown on the Elizabethan stage, could hardly out-Herod what the Roman arenas, or William Cecil's demurely called 'execution of justice' in the streets of London, offered to the crowds by way of spectacle.

Whether they were actually performed in imperial Rome has remained a moot point since Schlegel, who believed they were never meant to leave the rhetorical schools for the stage, and that Seneca had only deteriorated Attic tragedy (Schlegel 1815, 287-288), but an increasing number of productions around the world today strives to rehabilitate them (see Harrison 2000). The Latinist Florence Dupont for one is quite certain that they were indeed performed in Seneca's lifetime, with choral song and dance. The actability of her translations was brilliantly demonstrated in 2018 with a performance of *Thyestes* in the Avignon Cour d'Honneur under the direction of Thomas Jolly (after his eighteen-hour production of *Henry VI*), and a *Phèdre*, directed by Louise Vignaud at the Studio-Théâtre de la Comédie-Française (Dupont 2011, Dupont 2012).

Along with Seneca's "influence upon the *thought*, or what passes for thought, in the drama of Shakespeare and his contemporaries", Eliot detects in various English plays, *The Spanish Tragedy*, *Arden of Feversham*, *The Yorkshire Tragedy*, and *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *Othello*, a "'thriller' interest", an affinity with modern detective drama, "which

3 *The Tenne Tragedies of Seneca*, printed for the Spenser Society from a copy in the library of its President, John Leigh.

owes nothing essential to Seneca". Lorna Hutson explains this popular interest in forensic drama by the participatory nature of jury trials which involved increasing numbers of individuals in the legal machinery. To Eliot, the taste for police enquiries was due to recent crimes committed in England, while the taste for sanguinary horrors came from the Italian drama, which is "bloodthirsty in the extreme". In *Titus Andronicus* for instance, "indeed one of the stupidest and most uninspired plays ever written", definitely not by Shakespeare, "there is nothing really Senecan at all" (Eliot 1927, xxii, xxv, xxvii; Hutson 2007). Admittedly, the playwright found food for the Thyestean banquet in Ovid, yet it does taste of Atreus' dish: Colin Burrow finds "more than hints and flavours for its stew from Ovid's story", but thinks it "often impossible, and probably undesirable, to try to unpick a Senecan thread from a radial web of other influences". At the end of *Titus*, "Ovid and Seneca are all part of an intertextual concoction" (Burrow 2013, 165).

Eliot rightly supposes that the first Elizabethan dramatists had had "a smattering of Seneca" at school. "During this period, the fashions set at the Universities were followed at the Inns of Court" (Eliot 1927, xlvi). Classical plays were performed in Latin at Cambridge, somewhat later at Oxford. Kyd, Peele, Marlowe were acquainted with several languages, and their fellow dramatists could have read the translations when those first appeared. In the mid-fifteenth century, "Seneca was largely an academic's playwright" (Ullyot 2008, 99). Indeed, if we want to understand English revenge tragedy, Elizabeth Sandis reminds us, "we must keep Latin in the picture", or better still, "a common language which transcends the choice of Latin and English: the Thyestean language", used by the dramatists to compete with one another, as did Heywood, the first to see his translation printed, with the mention "Fellow of All Souls College in Oxford' on the title page" (Sandis 2021, 222, 226).

Medieval Seneca

Seneca was widely read throughout the Middle Ages. His early popularity is attested by numerous miniatures which represent him in various occupations, standing between Plato and Aristotle (MS Hunter 231), teaching under a canopy (MS Paulmy, Ars. 1085), reading at his desk (BnF Latin 17842), or dying in his bath under the eyes

of Nero in a manuscript of the *Roman de la Rose* (Harley 4425)⁴. He was included by Saint Jerome in the Christian corpus of virtuous men, on the basis of an apocryphal correspondence with Saint Paul, who was reputed to have converted him⁵. In the twelfth century, the *Metalogicon* of John of Salisbury ranked him with the highest pagan moralists. Yet the philosopher was often criticized for his excessive opulence, at odds with the principles of Stoicism, and his silence at Nero's matricide. Voragine's life of Saint Peter in the *Legenda aurea* included an account of Seneca's death, with an etymology of his predestined name, *se necans*: "though he was forced to do so, he died by his own hand" (Voragine 1993, 347).

It is worth recalling here that the stage history of Seneca began in Padua, a place visited by numerous English scholars, students of Greek, law or medicine as well as aspiring diplomats and educated travellers (Woolfson 2013, 572-87). Lovato de' Lovati, who had transcribed and commented Seneca's tragedies around 1290, stood at the centre of a literary circle composed of Paduan notaries and judges like himself, "scholars specialized in law and its daily practice owing to their mastery of grammar and rhetoric" (Frizet 2021, 7,19, my translation), forerunners of the Florentine humanists (Witt 2000, chs. III and IV). The first Senecan tragedy was the work of Albertino Mussato, identified by Del Virgilio as Lovati's poetic heir, and by Boccaccio as a close friend of Dante. His *Ecerinis* (1315), "indeed the first tragedy of Western theatre", was modelled on *Thyestes* but based on a recent historical event, the tyranny of Ezzelino III, a veritable Nero, and part of a patriotic engagement at a time of struggles for autonomy in the Northern city-states (Pastore-Stocchi 1973, 25): by order of the Commune, it was read publicly every year as a political antidote⁶,

4 See the richly illustrated Lojkine 2019, 183-220.

5 Jerome writes in the *De viris illustribus*, cap. xii, that he would not have included him in his catalogue of Saints but for this correspondence, *nisi me illae Epistolae provocarent, quae leguntur a plurimis, Pauli ad Senecam, et Senecae ad Paulum*. In *Tableau des écrivains ecclésiastiques ou Livre des hommes illustres*, 1838.

6 See the commentaries of the grammarians Guizzardo and Castellano in Mussato 1900, 109. Anna Fontes' analysis of the play and its political context (Fontes 2012) stresses the importance of Boethius' *Consolatio* as its philosophical model, along with Seneca's literary model. Ezzelino da Romano ruled Padua from 1236 to 1259.

evidence that the writers' interest in Seneca extended beyond his literary talents.

It was at the request of Cardinal Niccolò da Prato, possibly after his encounter with Mussato at the Italian court of Emperor Henry VII, that the Dominican Nicholas Trevet (c.1260-c.1330), son of a justice in eyre, already notorious for his commentaries of Boethius' *Consolatio*, undertook to elucidate Seneca's tragedies (Dufal 2020). Designed as reading guides, Trevet's *expositiones* of the *Tragedies* constitute a vast critical apparatus of antique pagan and Christian literature, yet are often dismissed by critics as scholastic paraphrases⁷. Grace Wilson, for instance, does not believe that Chaucer knew them, since they are lacking in "moral as well as aesthetic remark": "Further decreasing the chance that Chaucer knew the plays through Trevet's commentaries is the nature of those commentaries themselves". They "seem quite mechanical", often telling where scenes divide, or which character makes which speech. "Their greatest strength lies in supplying synonyms and paraphrases, with many an 'id est' and 'scilicet'" (Wilson 1993, 143-144). Never mind the fact, attested by the numerous surviving manuscripts, that this very strength, and Trevet's vast erudition, made them useful to countless readers. His commentaries had a large circulation around the networks of scholars and writers in France, Italy, England. Boccaccio owned a copy, and used it repeatedly in his works (Mazza 1966, 55-56).

The story of Constance in Trevet's Anglo-Norman *Les Cronicles* is the source of Chaucer's "Man of Law's Tale". Gower used the same story to illustrate envy in his *Confessio Amantis*⁸. With or without Trevet's help, Seneca's fame grew in England, among other media, via *The Canterbury Tales*. Chaucer, appointed justice of the peace for Kent in 1385, no doubt spoke from experience when he portrayed a corrupt 'maunciple' of the Temple, the lecherous judge Appius, a very Angelo, the Summoner who knows no Latin and only two or three legal terms, or a greedy sergeant-at-law – "al was fee symple to hym in effect" (Chaucer 1988, l. 319, 567-86). Discussing pre-

7 Dufal (96) notes, among many intertextual elements, a comparison between Boethius' *Consolatio* I, v, and the third chorus of *Hippolytus*, ll. 959-88.

8 See Correale 1991; Dauby 2011.

cedents, the Elizabethan recorder, William Fleetwood of Clifford's Inn, would observe "That Chawcer, sometimes a Speaker in this parliament howse, said well, *Elecet nos per implere omnem iustitiam*" (Hartley 1981, 358)⁹.

Seneca is hailed as Nero's 'maister' in *The Monk's Tale*, "For of moralitee he was the flower". He was much dreaded by his pupil, "For he fro vyces wolde hym ay chastise / Discreetly, as by word and nat by dede", which suggests to some that his own conduct was not faultless, to others that he abstained from corporal punishment, though according to William of Aragon (c.1240-1300), a commentator of Boethius, at the fatal dinner Nero remembered being struck by Seneca when a boy (Taylor 1998, 111). Whatever his methods, Seneca taught Nero that "an emperour moot need / Be vertuou and hate tyrannye", before he fell victim to it. Numerous story-tellers of *The Canterbury Tales* quote Seneca. The Manciple recommends the reading of Solomon, David and Seneca to prevent rash speaking, and ward off tale-tellers of perilous matter. An indignant Host, revolted by the lecherous justice in the Physician's tale, wishes "As shameful deeth as herte may devise / Come to thise juges and their advocats" (*Pardoner's Prologue*, Chaucer 1988, ll. 290-91).

Scholars vary hugely in their interpretations of these references, whether they should be taken as sound advice to the nobility or obvious parody. Grace Wilson notes that they are made by the most preacherly pilgrims, and create amusing contrasts with the actual behaviour of rogues like the Summoner and the Pardoner who quote *De ira*. Some at least of these quotations are clearly ironical. As so much else in Chaucer, they "would serve either straight teaching, parody, or (the most likely) "'simple' entertainment" (Wilson 1993, 139). Shakespeare who has Seneca's name mentioned only once, by the sententious and unvirtuous Polonius, may well betray a touch of Chaucer's irony. Like Chaucer's tales, his plays teem with minor judicial employees, clerks, notaries, scribes occasionally denouncing unfair procedures like Hastings' trial in *Richard III*, and

9 On 16 May 1572, *Proceedings in the Parliaments of Elizabeth I* (Hartley 1981). The matter discussed was fraudulent conveyance. Perhaps the recorder had in mind their election when he forged the verb *elecere*. The exact quote, from the Vulgate, Matthew 3:15, is *sic enim decet nos implere omnem iustitiam*.

several major ones who run the gamut from unscrupulous Shallow to the Lord Chief Justice of *Henry IV*.

The Canterbury Tales took some inspiration from Boccaccio's *Decameron*, and some of their material from his *De casibus virorum illustrium*¹⁰. Nero's downfall figures in the Monk's *de casibus* list between "the Erle Hugelyn of Pize" and "Oloferne, which Fortune ay kiste". The Monk had thought of telling the pilgrims a life of Saint Edward, "Or ellis, first, tragedies wol I telle". And since the word was not largely known in England, he offers a full definition:

Tragedie is to seyn a certeyn storie,
As olde bookes maken us memorie,
Of hym that stood in greet prosperitee,
And is yfallen out of heigh degree
Into myserie, and endeth wretchedly.
(*Prologue to the Monk's Tale*, ll. 1973-77)

The first fall narrated is Lucifer's, who fell for his sin, and dragged Adam down into hell. Not fatal errors, as in Boccaccio, but sins, receive their due punishment. Thus Chaucer, who like the Wife of Bath "Reedeth Senek, and redeth eek Boece", passed on to the Middle Ages the formula drawn from his own translation of Boethius' *Consolatio Philosophiae*: "What other thinges bywaylen the criinges of Tragedies. but only the dedes of fortune. that with an vnwar stroke ouerturneth the realmes of grete nobley" (Chaucer, trans. of Boethius, 1868, 35).

Tragic Mirrors

Boethius featured in Boccaccio's *de casibus* tales as victim of the barbarous tyrant Theodoric the Great, and was included by the Benedictine monk John Lydgate among the tragic figures of the *Fall of Princes*. The Prologue to the *Fall* traces the tradition to Seneca, also a victim of tyranny:

Senek in Rome, thoruh his hih prudence
Wrot tragedies of great moralitie. (Lydgate 1924, ll. 253-54)

10 On the extent of Boccaccio's influence, see Koff and Schildgen, eds, 2000.

Lydgate names as authors of tragedies Seneca, Tully, Petrarch, “who John Bochas told how Princes fell into distress”, and gives praise to Chaucer, “who refined our language”, along with a list of his remarkable works. The *Fall of Princes* was adapted from Boccaccio via Laurent de Premierfait’s French translation. Lydgate’s printer, John Wayland, aimed to continue “where as Bochas lefte, vnto this presente time, chiefly of suche as Fortune has dalyed with here in this ylande” (Baldwin 1938, 66).

A devoted servant of Henry VIII, Edward Hall of Gray’s Inn was well attuned to the reversals that caused the downfalls of ambitious statesmen he had witnessed himself, for “suche is worldly vnstablens, and so waueryng is false flattering fortune” (Hall 1809, 45). It was this major Senecan theme in his *Union of the two families of Lancastre and Yorke* that guided a group of Inns members to use its material when they undertook to write a sequel to the *Fall of Princes*, under the reign of Mary Tudor¹¹. Their *Mirror for Magistrates* made several momentous innovations to Lydgate’s model. Instead of reporting stories going back to the origins of humanity, the ‘Tragedies’, borrowed from Hall, spanned the same stretch of English history as his chronicle, and were told in the first person by the ghosts of eminent statesmen, returned from Hades. They also moved further away from Boccaccio by confessing their faults like criminals at the bar, whatever part fortune may have played in their downfall, rather than pitiful victims of fate. Later editions extended as far back as the British kings. The edition of 1587, closest in time to the writing of Shakespeare’s first *Henriad*, includes thirty-four tragedies drawn from Hall. The *Mirror’s* Dame Fortune, a combination of God’s will and fate, draws her main features, like Chaucer’s, from Boethius.

Were Seneca’s plays written as advice to Nero, or urges to unthroned him, no one knew for sure, but he had witnessed at first hand many a bloody deed, and managed to survive four emperors before falling victim to the fifth, which made him a reliable instructor on the growth of tyranny, the responsibilities of magistrates, the mutability of court life. To the historian Paul Veyne, the life and death of Seneca “are a true novel of Neronian times” (Veyne ed., in Seneca 1993,

¹¹ See Lucas 1994, 31-54.

iii). Or of Tudor times, since his plots could offer interesting parallels with recent events in England.

The philosopher plays a brief role as Nero's mentor in *Octavia*, long erroneously attributed to him. When Seneca enters at the opening of Act II, he already knows that fortune smiled on him a while "To th'ende that I to honours court extold / From stately seate might have the greater fall" (*Octavia. The Ninth Tragedy*, in Seneca 1927, vol. II, 163). His advice, that a monarch should be obeyed out of love rather than fear, is fiercely rejected by his pupil. But the plot obliquely proves the counsellor right, when Nero's decision to divorce Octavia and marry his mistress Poppea causes a popular riot. Elizabethan admirers of Seneca could easily draw topical parallels, especially when England is brought into the picture by Octavia's nurse. Nutrix recalls the reign of Claudius, who "held the world in his precinct", and whose line is now doomed to extinction by fortune, as Nero's will be if he does not mend his ways:

The Britaine Ocean coaste that long was free,
He rulde at will, and made it to agree
Their Romaine Gallies great for to embrace.
(*Octavia*, in Seneca 1927, vol. II, 146-47)

Thomas Nuce dedicated his translation of *Octavia* to Robert Dudley, Elizabeth's closest favourite, whose wife Amy Robsart had just died in mysterious circumstances¹². There is no evidence that he had any thought of Henry VIII, yet some at least among his readers must have remembered Queen Catherine of Aragon when Nutrix urges Octavia to bear Nero's infidelities patiently, "for such like paine, / The queene of gods was forced to sustaine", offering her "on earth Queene Junos princely place". Octavia's fears epitomized Catherine's fate:

Into what banisht exiles place,
Woulde Nero haue mee for to passe,
Or fortune bids, with frowning face? (*Octavia. The Ninth Tragedy*, vol. II, 187)

12 The conclusion of the inquest that it was an accident did not stop the rumours accusing Dudley of having organized her death, a version developed in *Leicester's Commonwealth*. Nuce's translation was published in 1561 while he was a student at Cambridge.

Similar topical allusions could be detected in *The Winter's Tale*, which stages the trial of a foreign princess and the banishment of her 'bastard' daughter. The unfair trial of Hermione was performed by the King's Men in the Parliament Chamber of Blackfriars, the very place where the historical Queen Catherine had stood before the legatine court, a scene reenacted in *Henry VIII*.

Seneca had already provided Thomas More of Lincoln's Inn, Erasmus' friend, with lessons in political philosophy:

When a comedy of Plautus is being played you propose to come on stage in the garb of a philosopher, and repeat Seneca's speech to Nero from the *Octavia*. Wouldn't it be better to take a silent role than to say something inappropriate, and thus turn the play into a tragi-comedy? (More 1975, 29)

Nero was one of More's models of tyranny when he wrote the *History of Richard III*, which would give material and food for thought to Shakespeare's witty villain. It was included in the Protestant Edward Hall's chronicle of the last Plantagenet reigns, the main source of Shakespeare's first Henriad. Roger Ascham, a staunch Protestant like Hall, had only mockeries for his "indenture English", but thought More's *History* so good that "if the rest of our story of England were so done, we might well compare with *Fraunce, Italy, or Germany* in that behalf" (Ascham 1904, 126). Ascham's distrust of foreign goods led him to proclaim England the new seat of classicism:

Now, let Italian, and Latin itself, Spanishe, French, Douch, and Englishe bring forth their lerning, and recite their Authors, Cicero onelie excepted, and one or two moe in Latin, they be all patched cloutes and ragges, in comparison of faire wouen broade clothes. (Ascham 1968, 17 v^o)

His textile metaphor would have numerous followers, among them Gascoigne and other Inns members who were torn like him between love of the classics and love of the nation.

Enter Shakespeare

Perhaps owing to Ben Jonson's famous comment on Shakespeare's little Latin and less Greek, literary tradition has long considered him ignorant of ancient tragedy beyond Seneca. If Shakespeare read the extant Latin versions, "he gained little from the experience", according to the Martindales, who dismiss Euripides in favour of Seneca whom the Elizabethans much preferred (Martindale and Martindale 1994, 41-44). Yet Shakespeare shows from the start traces of both influences. Various dramatic innovations attributed to Seneca, he could have found in Gascoigne's *Jocasta*. This play, which Gabriel Harvey aptly defined as "Quasi Synopsis Tragoediarum Omnium"¹³, a compendium of all the extant Theban plays, has many elements that would be refined in the histories: fatal curses, hubris, revenge, ghosts, stichomythia (all of which were Greek before their adoption by Seneca), oath breaking, prophecies and soothsayers, and strong feminine figures (Goy-Blanquet 2008, 286-303). Distinctly Euripidean are Antigone's stance for equity against state law, Creon's dispute with Tiresias about divine justice, and the multiplicity of view points stressed by Gascoigne,

How many men so many mindes,
And that, that one man judgeth good and just,
Some other deemes as deeply to be wrong.
(*Jocasta*, I.ii.353-55)¹⁴

The play also shows a rare understanding of *hamartia*,

So deeply faulteth none, the which unwares
Doth fall into the crime he can not shunne:
(*Jocasta*, I.i.134-35)

not a sin but a tragic mistake, where a majority of Elizabethan playwrights anticipated Vindice's view that "When the bad bleeds, then is the tragedy good" (*The Revengers Tragaedie*, III.v.199).

Richard III exhibits other more Senecan marks. The slanging match with Lady Anne definitely has some of the Eracles bite. When asked by

13 On the opening page of his copy. See Demetriou 2021.

14 See Gascoigne 1907.

the usurper Lycus what wedding gift she wants, Megara retorts: “Thine owne death els, or els the death of mee”. But Lycus’s blend of irony and insult in addressing her father-in-law Amphitryon – “To Jove thou gav’ste a wife, thou shalt nowe geve one to a king” – is not quite up to Richard’s, and fails to move her (*Hercules Furens. The First Tragedy*, in Seneca 1927, vol. I, 22). Clarence’s nightmare carries faint echoes of Theseus’ account of his trip to hell. Richard’s offer to recreate Edward’s children in their sister’s womb recalls the incestuous Oedipus who “fils the haples wombe wherin himself did lie / With graceless seede” (Neville’s translation, *Oedipus. The Fifth Tragedy*, in Seneca 1927, vol. I, 212).

Also Senecan are the long narratives peppered with mythological references that interrupt the action with sorrowful meditations on the tyrannies of life, Henry VI’s pastoral nostalgia in the midst of battle, Richard II’s hollow crown and Prince Hal’s, who prematurely weighs its golden load of insomnia. The first Henriad abounds in choric speeches, spoken out of character by protagonists like Exeter who speak for all England, in character by the wailing queens. Margaret is both a dispossessed queen, mother, wife, and a raging Senecan figure of hatred. As in Seneca, the family feud extends over several generations. Richard, often read as the unknowing instrument of retribution, is also the distorted spawn of the century’s civil wars. Increasingly introspective soliloquies become naturalized as part of their persona, from Richard III to Richard II and beyond. Richard II’s deposition incorporates the tragic fall of medieval monarchy in his own tragedy.

The “Senecan soundbites”, as Elizabeth Sandis likes to call them (2021, 227), if indeed designed as intensifiers, can be quite sparse. At the conclusion of *Titus Andronicus*, Tamora is killed before she utters a word, where Thyestes had hundreds. Shakespeare’s Andromache is allowed only fifteen lines, against four long scenes in *Troas*. The fall of Troy looms in the near future of *Troilus and Cressida*, as it did in *Troilus and Criseyde*. It has already taken place at the opening of *Troas*, perhaps the oddest instance of Seneca’s contribution to the canon. The two plays share several characters and events either staged or reported, yet could not sound farther apart. In Heywood’s translation, Andromache dreams that the ‘spright’ of her loving husband urges her to save their son from the Greeks. Andromache has fearful dreams too, and vainly tries, Calpurnia like, to dissuade Hector from going to fight Achilles, but is sharply scolded by her spouse: “You

train me to offend you, get you in". With harsh lucidity, she reproves him for placing honour above his and his family's lives: "do not count it holy / To hurt by being just". His last words to her – "Andromache, I am offended with you: / Upon the love you bear me, get you in" – show little love in return (*Troilus and Cressida*, V.iii.4, 19-19a, 74-75)¹⁵. The mention at I.ii that after being struck down by Ajax, "He chid Andromache and struck his armourer", has already smeared the epic portrait of the hero, a treatment inflicted to the whole unheroic cast. Like reason and love, honour and justice keep little company together.

Astyanax does not appear in *Troilus and Cressida*, but reminiscences of his fate are audible in *King John*, Constance's passionate pleas on behalf of her son, Arthur's begging "Good my mother, peace", the proleptic speculations of King Lewis and Pandulph around his fall. Arthur leaps from the walls of the castle as Astyanax did from the walls of Troy: "In midst of Pryams land (alas) the child leapt downe to ground". The Messenger who reports Astyanax's and Polyxene's deaths in *Troas*, the horrendous wounds on their bodies, the complex reactions of the watchers, and his conclusion, "Each people wept", Greeks and Trojans alike (*Troas. The Sixth Tragedy*, in Seneca 1927, vol. II, 50, 52), may have led Shakespeare to experiment with the emotional power of a narrative, when he has Tyrrel report the murder of Edward's children.

While thus sparing the audience one more gory scene, Shakespeare may also have been inspired to test the classical dictum, that a dramatic poet needs to discern what should be told and what can be shown, by Seneca's ineffability *topos*:

I am ashamed my destinies fowle (O Queene) to thunder out,
And openly to blaze my feare my trembling minde doth doubt:
Yet out it goes. (*Oedipus*, in Seneca 1927, vol. I, 193)¹⁶

For Horace and Aristotle, the procedure ensures against ridicule and dispenses with the representation of ugly or tedious scenes. But Shakespeare's recourse to narrative is not necessarily guided by decorum or convenience. *Henry VI Part Two* both shows and narrates

15 All references are to *Shakespeare, Œuvres complètes*, bilingual edition, ed. by Jean-Michel Déprats and Gisèle Venet (Shakespeare 2002-2016).

16 Blandine Le Callet, n. 19 to *Œdipe* (Le Callet 2022, 142-43), lists the uses of this 'topos de l'indicible' in six of Seneca's plays.

the Duchess of Gloucester's arrest. In *Part Three*, the audience witnesses the Duke of York's death, then hears the messenger's report to his sons. Warwick's threats against Edward at the French court are repeated word for word in the next scenes. Sometimes explained away by 'revision' theories, these doublets suggest that Shakespeare is testing the resonances of each mode. They are deliberate when he tries both manners in the same scene as if to establish which is more effective, and explores the emotions released by a story well told. The enemies of the captured York watch his sufferings with no sign of compassion, until he predicts how the tale of his tortures will affect future audiences. Where the raw event performed before their eyes has failed to awake pity or fear, now one of the watchers is moved by his words: "What, weeping-ripe, my Lord Northumberland?"¹⁷

Atreus' servant, Medea's and Clytemnestra's nurses, the chorus, are there to recall the rules of humanity to masters devoured by a *furor* leading them from *dolor*, a despair that triggers the action, to a *nefas* beyond the limits of human achievements (Dupont and Letessier 2011, ch. 4). They advise moderation, virtue, piety, and remain unheeded, a constant in Seneca's plays, who himself failed to influence Nero, as would so many Tudor mentors. Gorboduc seeks the advice of his counsellors and after listening to them for some two hundred lines, sees no reason to change his plans. Their speeches have no effect on the action, again a strong difference with Shakespeare's, but dispense well-meaning political or ethical lessons. Additional stanzas inserted here and there by Seneca's translators could stress moral teachings, and give the last word to Christian justice. As Robert Miola points out, after speeches in the high Senecan style, *Gorboduc* comes to the un-Senecan conclusion that Jove is the author of all just requital. In *Titus Andronicus*, Shakespeare "struggles with the challenge of moulding classical, Christian and native traditions into coherent and forceful drama" (Miola 1992, 31). The crucial point of challenge is the place of *jus*, the Latin name of a Roman creation, in an unchristian society. *Hercules Oetaeus* paints a heaven filled with the monsters that the hero has killed, only to see the jealous Juno turn them into constellations. Dramatic irony comes full circle when he is poisoned by the Hydra's blood. Yet his request to Jove, "Now show thy valiaunt sonne his sire, or set him in the clowd-

17 *Henry VI Part III*, I.iv.172, *Histoires I*, Déprats 2008.

es" (*Hercules Oetaeus. The Tenth Tragedy*, in Seneca 1927, 19), is granted at the end: "from heaven where I am set, / You heare my voyce" (The Fifthe Acte, in Seneca 1927, 256)¹⁸. Thus, the last of the *Tenne Tragedies*, whether wholly Seneca's work or not, provides a more hopeful end to the Elizabethan sequence.

The Senecan plays show unresolved tensions between capricious fortune and vengeful retribution: kings "are but dust", subject to "wavyng welth", yet they suffer the penalty of their own faults. This contradiction, which still raises many academic questions¹⁹, did not greatly trouble medieval readers of Boethius: his *Consolatio* depicted a cyclical regularity, a strong moral law, a superior Providence, behind Fortune's apparent vagaries. A form of divine justice will at long last be executed on the guilty characters, as promised by Thyestes' appeal to the gods, or Cassandra's prophecy in *Agamemnon*. Theseus repents his hasty condemnation of Hippolytus, owns himself guilty and calls on his own head the worst tortures endured in Hades by former hubristic offenders: "Now with thyne owne hands on thy selfe due vengeance do bestow" (*Hippolytus. The Fourth Tragedy*, in Seneca 1927, vol. I, 182). Doubts about the providential order of the world would mature with the years into major tragedy, at some distance from the Inns, yet Theseus and Hercules may well have stood as potent models for Othello's or Richard III's standing at the bar of their own guilty conscience.

New Words, New World

To Thomas Nashe, "Seneca let blood line by line and page by page at length must needs die to our stage" (Preface to Greene's *Menaphon*, Nashe 1958, 316). In Burrow's opinion, confirmed by Nashe's ironical comments on "English Seneca read by candlelight", the style of the *Tenne Tragedies* must have seemed old-fashioned to the new generation of playwrights: Heywood probably thought his own *Troas* a modish and modern affair, but throughout the translation, "he echoes the neo-medieval idiom of *The Mirror for Magistrates*" (Burrow 2013, 172). To put it kindly, as Ker and Winston do, "Heywood carefully unpacks the

18 Scholars since Daniel Heinsius have doubted this was fully Seneca's work, and still disagree on its authorship.

19 Winston 2006, 49, quotes Frederick Kiefer and Bruce Smith on this point.

Latin in a way that fully exploits its semantic potential” (Ker and Winston 2013, 43). Shakespeare would have his work cut out if he aimed to renovate old English Seneca and give it dramatic energy, while providing his actors with lines they could actually pronounce on stage. Indeed, rereading him after Heywood’s surfeit of alliteration, padded lines, Latinate word order, is a welcome relief. How could one weep for Hecuba when she laments that “The rest are lost and this alone now doth me mother call” (*Troas*, in Seneca 1927, vol. II, 45), or share Lycus’ glee, “chaunce geven hath to us a place alone”, when he plans to conquer Megara’s hand? (*Hercules Furens*, in Seneca 1927, vol. I, 19).

Heywood’s Thyestes opened his final speech with a thunderous appeal to

O Kyng of Dytis dungeon darke, and grysly ghosts of hell,
That in the deepe and dredfull dennis, of blackest Tartare dwell.
(Heywood’s original soliloquy for *Thyestes*, 1560, in Seneca 1927, vol. I, 93)

Not content with exhuming Thyestes’ ghost from “the darkened dens, which Dytys low doth keep”, in *Agamemnon* Studley further stresses the continuity by surpassing Heywood’s alliterative feast:

The flashing flames and furious force of fiery fervent heate,
Outraging in my boyling brest, my burning bones doth beate.
(*Agamemnon. The Eighth Tragedy*, in Seneca 1927, vol. II, 107)

Newton is not to be outdone: Syllanus, Octavia’s first husband, is made “A carkasse colde pore soule, and curelesse corse” (*Octavia*, in Seneca 1927, vol. II, 151). But neither translator follows the liberties taken by their pioneer. Considering that in *Troas* “the names of so manye unknowen Countreyes, Mountaynes, Desertes, and Woodes, shoulde have no grace in the English tongue”, and be too tedious to explain, Heywood wrote another beginning to the Third Chorus, omitting the forty places where the Trojan women are to be exiled (Heywood, “To the Reader”, *Troas*, in Seneca 1927, vol. II, 4)²⁰. Even learned readers may have had a hard time deciphering Studley’s

20 The latest French translation of the tragedies, by Blandine Le Callet (Le Callet 2022), helps readers with a 185-page-long dictionary of mythological characters and places at the end of the volume.

convoluted periphrases – “Phrygian Prophet’ for Cassandra, ‘Phoebus prelat Sminthicall’ for Chryses (*Agamemnon*, Seneca 1927, vol. II, 109-110) – and references to minor mythological characters like Cygnus. The Chorus’s “*grandaevi lassique senes*” is lavishly rendered as “The olde and auncient men well stept and grown in years, / Whose feeble trembling age procureth hory hayres” (*Agamemnon*, Seneca 1927, vol. II, 115). Indeed, to quote Eliot again, “The *Tenne Tragedies* must have shown conclusively to the most sensitive contemporary ears that the fourteener had had its day”, no need to look much further for the “Ercles bombast, ridiculed by Shakespeare, Jonson and Nashe” (Eliot in Seneca 1927, I, xxxiii).

In moments of extreme stress, the characters of *Titus Andronicus* express their anxiety through borrowed fragments from Seneca, Vergil, Horace or Ovid. Why they speak garbled Latin has been variably explained. If they are the erudite Peele’s work, as Brian Vickers thinks, they must be deliberate adaptations (Vickers 2002, 148-243)²¹. Why they quote the original Seneca, instead of the contemporary *Tenne Tragedies*, is another matter. At II.i, Demetrius’ exit lines make direct reference to Seneca: *Sit fas aut nefas* (be it proper or improper, just or unjust, permitted or forbidden...). *Per Stygia, per manes vehor* is a free rendering of Phaedra’s passionate vow, *Per Styga, per amnes igneos amens sequar* (through Styx, through rivers of fire I shall madly follow, *Phaedra*, I. 1180), perhaps because the Styx had dropped out of Studley’s translation: “through burning fire runne after thee I shall” (*Hippolytus. The Fourth Tragedy*, in Seneca 1927, vol. I, 161). At IV.i, Titus’s *Magni dominator poli, / Tam lentus audit scelera, tam lentus vides ?* takes another leaf from Seneca’s *Hippolytus*: – *Magne regnator deum / Tam lentus audit scelera, tam lentus vides ?* – rather than wordy Studley’s: “O Souveraygne Sire of Gods, dost thou abide so long to heare / This vile abomination? So long dost thou forbear / To see this haynous villany?” (*Phaedra*, II. 671-72; *Hippolytus*, Seneca 1927, vol. I, 160)²². The next quote, *Terras Astrea reliquit* (IV.iii.4), deplores the flight from the earth of Astrea, goddess of justice, which marked the

21 So does Chaudhuri 2014 who argues that the play’s fascination for dismemberment reflects the nature of its collaborative authorship.

22 Sandis points out this line as a moment of heightened drama, “when the sound of Seneca rings out” (Sandis 2021, 227).

beginning of the Iron Age in *Metamorphoses*, and in the *Roman de la Rose* translated by Chaucer²³. As Nuce's Seneca puts it, "The Starry specked virgin flower of skies, / Which Justice hight, [... *etc. etc.*] Each earthly stound is fled" (*Octavia*, Seneca 1927, vol. II, 165). The maxim, "*Suum cuique* is our Roman justice" (I.i.283), which draws its origin from Justinian's *Institutiones*, winks at the Inns of court students in the audience (Nuttall 2021).

Young Shakespeare is peacocking, Peter Stein commented while directing *Tito Andronico* in Italy. Shakespeare does indeed, out-kydding Kyd, quoting Seneca from the original, but he wears his Latin culture with a difference (Goy-Blanquet 1993). Hippolytus accused himself, he did not invoke the gods like Titus who sends them desperate arrows. Still, both Hippolytus and Titus are amazed at man's capacity for evil, Miola points out, both protest against divine silence, a protest echoing throughout the period, up to *Lear* and *Pericles*. To Amphitryon's question, "Who is the rector there of ryght, and judge of equity?" Theseus explains that several gods, each ruling over a separate place of judgment, are appointed to the task, "and guilt to th'author theare / Returnes, and th'hurtfull with their owne example punisht bee". He then unrolls the pains suffered by the "Gylty Ghosts" of Ixion, Tantalus and their ilk. Yet Juno can freely unleash her fury on the guiltless Hercules, driving him to murder his family. The sun disappears at noon, plunging the world into darkness, as it will Thyestes', and Macbeth's Scotland (*Hercules Furens*, Seneca, 1927, vol. I, 32-34). When he comes to his senses, Hercules wants revenge, then understands he is the killer:

THESEUS

Who ever yet to ignoraunce hath given name of cryme?

HERCULES

Full oftentimes did errour greate the place of gylt obtayne.

(*Hercules Furens*, The Fifth Acte, 49)

In the Latin original, Amphitryon pleads that Hercules' error is not a crime: *Quis nomen usquam sceleris errori addidit?* and receives this an-

23 Chaucer's *Romaunt of the Rose*, a partial translation of Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meung's allegorical poem, is mentioned by the narrator in the Prologue to *The Legend of Good Women*.

swer: *Saepe error ingens sederis obtinuit locum*, madness is no excuse. In the translation, the argument over the nature of the tragic fault is nipped in the bud. Theseus begs "Of this one only cryme I do a pardon of thee crave", and Hercules allows himself no extenuating circumstances: "Shall he geve pardon to himselfe, that to none els it gave?" (*Hercules Furens*, Seneca 1927, vol. I, 50)²⁴. He is resolved to execute his own sentence by suicide, as will the Elizabethan heroes of revenge tragedies.

Hercules' fate, Medea's, and other victims' turned criminals, raises a central question. Could the silence of the gods, or their active meanness, give license to the taking of justice into one's hands? There was no easy way out of the dilemma for Christian lawyers trained to abide by the law, no ambiguity about its Pauline terms: "Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath: for it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord"²⁵. Where Shakespeare's difference grows most significant is on the highly popular theme of revenge. In one of his early plays, we saw three sons burn with proper Senecan hatred after the murder of their fathers, and vow destruction to the murderer's kin:

WESTMORELAND

Plantagenet, of thee and these thy sons,
Thy kinsmen and thy friends, I'll have more lives
Than drops of blood were in my father's veins.
(3 *Henry VI*, I.i.95-97)

CLIFFORD

The sight of any of the house of York
Is as a Fury to torment my soul;
And till I root out their accursed line,
And leave not one alive, I live in hell.
(3 *Henry VI*, I.iii.30-33)

RICHARD

I cannot weep, for all my body's moisture
Scarce serves to quench my furnace-burning heart;
Nor can my tongue unload my heart's great burden,
For selfsame wind that I should speak withal
Is kindling coals that fires all my breast [...]

24 In the Latin text, ll. 1237-38.

25 Epistle to the Romans, 12:19, King James Bible.

Richard, I bear thy name: I'll venge thy death,
 Or die renowned by attempting it.
 (3 *Henry VI*, II.i.79-83)

A new note is struck when Macduff is informed that his wife and children have been killed:

MALCOM
 Be comforted:
 Let's make us medicines of our great revenge,
 To cure this deadly grief.
 MACDUFF
 He has no children. All my pretty ones?
 Did you say all? O hell-kite! All?
 What, all my pretty chickens and their dam
 At one fell swoop?
 MALCOM
 Dispute it like a man.
 MACDUFF
 I shall do so.
 But I must also feel it as a man.
 (*Macbeth*, IV.iii.214-22)

Three sons, again, are expected to avenge their fathers in *Hamlet*. Claudius the fratricide knows his sins cannot be absolved if he continues to enjoy their benefits. Hamlet does not kill him yet, but waits in the wings with further explorations of conflicting imperatives. To Burrow, he is haunted "by a whole range of classical actions and modes of speech that threaten to absorb him"; his self-berating soliloquy "O, what a rogue and peasant slave am I" is a modernized Senecan pastiche of Atreus' *Ignave, iners, enervis* (*Thyestes*, l. 176), possibly "directed against earlier Elizabethan Senecan heroes who talk big and act bloody". Thus Hamlet's inaction is "partly a consequence of his troubled and hybrid inheritance" (Burrow 2013, 174-177)²⁶.

Eliot's diagnosis, remember, was that Hamlet was dominated by an emotion in excess of the facts as they appear (Eliot 1921, 101).

²⁶ Burrow also notes Hamlet's refusal to let "the soul of Nero enter this firm bosom", a rhetorical exercise "done in a grand guignol manner" (175). Here Perry (2021, 80) notes an awareness of both Latin text and translation, proof of a rich intertextual mine.

Did Shakespeare so mishandle his material, or is this inaction the mark of his developing thought, away from the typical avenger? Laertes on being told that Hamlet killed his father, vows "To cut his throat i' the church", with Claudius's unreserved approval: "No place, indeed, should murder sanctuarize". Fortinbras has "Shark'd up a list of lawless resolute" to recover his inheritance. But Hamlet ponders, and wonders whether a solitary act of vengeance, or even taking arms against a sea of troubles, can put the world back on its hinges. Measured against Laertes' rash behaviour, or Fortinbras's cold unprincipled determination, the hero's "sceptical variation" on the theme of revenge places him on a higher ontological level. His death, like Brutus's, like Lear's, leaves the world poorer. After Horatio, Edgar mourns this tragic loss at the conclusion of Lear's progress from tyrannical old man to crucified victim: "The oldest hath borne most; we that are young / Shall never see so much, nor live so long"²⁷.

Perry thinks it possible to imagine Shakespeare's development from *Richard III* to *Hamlet* "as operating in concert with an ongoing interest in Seneca rather than as jettisoning him". Not only does Hamlet deliberate in terms close to *De ira* (I.xii, 1-2), he is also "Senecan in his emotional turbulence and competitive aggressiveness", and has no qualms about killing protagonists who spy on him (Perry 2021, 18, 81, 87-88). Here one might object that they are hoist with their own petard, justly killed by their own treachery, a recurrent theme in the play. Seneca may well be the source of Hamlet's deliberative habits, and mimetic rivalry with Marston a significant element in Shakespeare's design, but its originality is the inclusion of revengers determined to execute a form of justice made to appear by comparison as archaic as the honour killings denounced today by Iranian women.

In reopening the case of Peele's part in *Titus* and *King John*, Jonathan Bate identifies a familiar pattern: whether Shakespeare was revising or dramatizing others' works, he "tended to begin by following his principal source quite closely then to veer ever further from it as he developed the action and the characters in his own distinctive

27 *Hamlet*, IV.vii.123-24, I.i.98, *Tragédies I*, Déprats 2002, *King Lear*, V.iii.300-301, *Tragédies II*, Déprats 2002.

manner" (Bate in Shakespeare 2018, 133)²⁸. This applies equally well to Seneca's part in his plays. "What passes for thought, in the drama of Shakespeare and his contemporaries" has gradually grown into a confident, singular (with due respect to Perry), mature reflection on human justice. At both ends of the poet's writing career, from *The Comedy of Errors* to *Cymbeline*, harsh princely authorities declare themselves unable to show mercy – they "may pity, though not pardon", their hands are tied by the law of the country. The first of many trial scenes in the canon is Elinor of Gloucester's in *Henry VI Part Two*, a mockery of justice designed to bring down her husband, the Lord Protector. Richard II, Hermione, Queen Catherine will be made to stand before equally unfair courts of law, whose verdict is prewritten. Ulysses' sycophantic eulogy of hierarchy,

Take but degree away, untune that string,
And, hark what discord follows: [...]

Force should be right, or, rather, right and wrong,
Between whose endless jar justice resides,
Should lose their names, and so should justice too...

(*Troilus and Cressida*, I.iii.104-13)

is actually a warrior's call to arms: "Troy in our weakness stands, not in her strength" (I.iii.132). Informal courts are held in *Julius Caesar*, *King Lear*, where the audience stand as jury. In *Measure for Measure*, Angelo reminds them that

The jury passing on the prisoner's life
May in the sworn twelve have a thief or two
Guiltier than him they try [...]

(*Measure for Measure*, II.i.19-21)

thus bidding everyone to reflect on their own faults. Before inner courts of conscience, Clarence's murderers, Richard III, Claudius, Othello, like prisoners at the bar plead "Guilty! Guilty!" Where the wronged Tamora's fury could never be sated, Isabella demands "justice, justice, justice, justice!" from Duke Vincentio, yet when pressed by another innocent victim, she begs forgiveness for her

²⁸ Bate's interest in the stage history of the play does not extend beyond Deborah Warner's RSC production in 1989.

offender (*Measure for Measure*, V.i.29; V.i.434-52). Thanks to her plea, and thanks to an amazing conjunction of tricks, disguise, faith that only the theatre, like Providence, can create in a post-lapsarian world, the 'renegade' tolerance so fiercely denounced by staunch Calvinists wins the day.

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The Dark Side: Seneca and Shakespeare

Robert S. Miola

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 Muscato, 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 reimagining of extended passages, characters, and actions; and the refiguration of a convention, *the domina-nutrix* dialogue².

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 word-play 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 son⁴. 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 Armado⁵. 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 outcry⁶:

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 τὰνθρώπων 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 oceans⁷.

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, 207f). 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, "Tantum et Pelopem aspic"); 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 exemplars:

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 attingi* (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 patience⁸.

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 from 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 feel⁹. 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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Seneca Improved: Shakespeare's Medieval Optimism

Patrick Gray

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.

Keywords: Nihilism, Calvinism, Romance, Medieval drama, Tragedy, Tragicomedy

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 worldview 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 *miser cordia*. 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 *miser cordia*, 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 Cynus 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 betrayal⁸. Within this brutal context, no-one can afford the vulnerability that *miser cordia* 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", "bestly" 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 just¹⁵. 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 malevolent¹⁹. 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-

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 compassion²⁶. 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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“Teach me how to curse”: Senecan Historiography and Octavia’s Agrippina in Richard III

Caroline Engelmayr

This article extends explorations of a Renaissance “Seneca available for generic appropriation” (Mayne 2020) by tracing Shakespeare’s receptions of the pseudo-Senecan *Octavia* in *Richard III*. As the only complete *fabula praetexta* (Roman historical drama) to have survived from antiquity, the *Octavia* offers critics the chance to trace the dramatic resources that an underexplored classical genre offered to early modernity. In the *Octavia*, an anonymous Flavian tragedy attributed to Seneca in the Renaissance, Shakespeare encountered a historiographical debate – invested in exploring processes of cultural memory and national myth-making – that interrogates the arc of Rome’s past. In *Richard III*, Shakespeare intervenes in the *Octavia*’s historiographical clash between Nero, who champions a teleological vision of the peace and stability of *imperium sine fine*, and the ghost of Agrippina, who locates in the ruling dynasty’s regime a cyclical continuation of Roman wars worse than civil. By reimagining Agrippina in Margaret of Anjou – an unrecognized adaptation – and staging the fulfilment of her Octavian curse, Shakespeare dramatizes the triumph of her cyclical philosophy of history. He discovers in the *praetexta* an unlikely source of inspiration for female voices from the margins that purge the sins of tyranny and shape the trajectory of a nation’s history.

Keywords: Seneca, Shakespeare, *Octavia*, *Richard III*, historical drama, curses

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The past decade has witnessed a radical reevaluation of Renaissance Senecanism¹. Critics have expanded beyond the focus on “autar-

1 All citations of the *Octavia* refer to Boyle’s 2008 edition. All citations of *Richard III* refer to Siemon’s 2009 edition. All citations of other Shakespeare plays refer to Proudfoot, Thompson, and Kaston’s 1998 edition. All translations of the *Octavia* are Boyle’s unless otherwise noted.

“autarkic selfhood” and unquenchable *ira* that had long dominated the scholarly conversation. Instead, they have uncovered a Renaissance “Seneca available for generic appropriation” (Mayne 2020, n.p.)². We are now inclined to think of Senecanism as a pervasive literary phenomenon that infiltrated nearly every early modern genre, from pastoral to epic, comedy to lyric³. This development is a welcome one, not least because it has encouraged critics to explore aspects of the tragedies’ afterlives that had previously been sidelined. This includes the plays that circulated as Senecan in the Renaissance but are now recognized as spurious. Emily Mayne’s study of appropriations of *Hercules Oetaeus* in the *Faerie Queene* notes that the play’s apocryphal status helps account for its idiosyncratic mix of “tragedy and tragic-comedy” (Mayne 2020, n.p.). Curtis Perry’s *Shakespeare and Senecan Tragedy* likewise recovers the pseudo-Senecan *Octavia* as a source for Shakespeare’s history plays (Perry 2020, 37-72). Perry argues that the *Octavia*, which recounts a historical episode from the emperor Nero’s reign, encourages “subsequent writers to see Senecan drama as a vehicle for depicting political history” (Perry 2020, 45). By reading the play alongside *Richard III* in particular, he convincingly shows how the generic coordinates of Shakespeare’s historical tragedy form a direct imitation of the pseudo-Senecan drama.

Perry’s study, however, does not capture the full range of dramatic possibilities that the *Octavia* suggested to Shakespeare and his contemporaries. In the complex ecosystem of scholarship on early modern Seneca, the *Octavia* holds a dubious distinction. The play stands as a plausible contender for the single most influential Senecan tragedy in the European Renaissance, the ultimate model for the historical dramas that held the early modern stage from Mussato to Racine. Yet it has often been treated as a footnote to accounts of early modern Senecanism⁴. When critics do consider it, they tend to read it for its points of overlap with authentic Senecan drama: as a window into the psychology of tyranny, with Nero as a real-life Atreus (Jones

2 On autarkic selfhood, see especially Braden 1985; Boyle 1997; and Miola 1992.

3 On pastoral, see Espie 2019 and Espie and Adkins 2022. On epic, see Mayne 2020; Byville 2008; and Braden 1989. On comedy, see Perry 2020, 23; Burrow 2013, 184; and Miola 1992, 177-87. On lyric, see Moul 2017 and Moul 2015, 41-47.

4 Braden (1985, 8, 106, 202, 249); Boyle (1997, 84, 101-02, 145, 200); and Miola (1992, 145, 191) only mention it a handful of times in their seminal studies.

1977, 270; Braden 1985, 106, 202; Miola 1992, 145); a narrative of bloody vengeance (Boyle 1997, 145, 200); or the site of a particularly resonant *domina-nutrix* scene (Kragelund 2016, 363-419). Perry follows this trend. He argues that the *Octavia* helps Shakespeare construct *Richard III* around a typically Senecan double-bind of historical causality. Just as revengers like Atreus and Medea remain poised between assertions of "their own will-to-power" and their keen awareness of the constraints of the prior literary tradition, Richard's desire to "escape into the 'open air'" clashes with his recognition of the "inescapability of the Tudor myth" that has pre-determined his dramatic plot (Perry 2020, 39, 50, 63).

This article argues that Shakespeare derived a unique set of dramatic resources from his reading of the *Octavia*, theatrical techniques on display only in this idiosyncratic Roman play. Although the drama was transmitted as part of Seneca's corpus⁵, classicists now recognize the *Octavia* as an anomaly in three main ways. First, it was not written by Seneca; we know this because the play includes a reference to Nero's death (*Oct.* 624-631) and the emperor outlived his old tutor. Second, the play differs in literary-political periodization from the authentic dramas. The tragedy's anonymous author (the "*Octavia*-poet") likely wrote it during the Flavian period, reflecting on Nero's regime from the vantage point of the imperial dynasty that took power after his death. Third, and most importantly, the *Octavia* is unique in genre. In recent years, classicists have demonstrated that *fabula praetexta* (Roman historical drama) forms a genre distinct from mythologically-inspired plays, complete with its own performance tradition, thematic concerns, and aesthetic conventions (Kragelund 2016; Ginsberg 2015a). This development renders the *Octavia* ripe for further exploration amid the scholarly recovery of a generically diverse Renaissance Seneca. Indeed, as the only complete *praetexta* to have survived from classical antiquity, the *Octavia* offers critics the

5 In her discussion of *pseudepigrapha* (texts whose authorship is misattributed) from classical antiquity, Irene Peirano notes that "the pseudonymity, or wrongful authorial ascription, of a text is sometimes primary and organic to the work itself and sometimes secondary, the result of the text's reception history" (Peirano 2012, 1). The *Octavia* is an example of secondary pseudonymity; the text does not explicitly claim to be written by Seneca, but its stylistic overlap with the authentic dramas led to its inclusion in the corpus.

chance not just to trace a single play's Renaissance afterlives but to uncover the dramatic resources that an entire ancient genre offered to early modernity.

The gap between the Renaissance and modern understanding of the *Octavia* – as a seamless part of a unified literary corpus and as an outlier that teems with oddities – opens suggestive possibilities for reception studies. Although its inclusion in the Senecan corpus granted this anonymous tragedy authority and cultural currency in the Renaissance, its apocryphal status invites us as modern critics to explore how it does not always mesh neatly with prevalent Senecan aesthetics. In what follows, I aim to resist the readerly impulse for assimilation that the *praetexta*'s canonical status seems to encourage: it is tempting to imagine that, because of its mistaken attribution to the Roman dramatist, the play's early modern afterlives closely track the reception histories of authentically Senecan tragedies. Yet that approach only tells half of the story. If early modern readers of the *Octavia* encountered a Senecan *praetexta*, critics have explored the "Senecan" part in detail, but not the "*praetexta*". Now that scholars have meticulously analyzed the links that connect the *Octavia* to the rest of the Senecan corpus, what remains is to attend to the divergent possibilities for appropriation that it offered to Shakespeare, vestiges of generic, authorial, and political idiosyncrasies that we now recognize even if he did not.

This article contends that the *Octavia* informs Shakespeare's exploration of competing narratives of English history in *Richard III*. When he read the *Octavia*, Shakespeare accessed critiques of empire that owe as much to Silver Age epic, annals, and biography as Seneca's authentic plays. He encountered a historiographical debate – invested in exploring processes of cultural memory and national myth-making – that pits Nero's teleological narrative of *imperium sine fine* against the assertions of cyclical strife championed by the raging ghost of Agrippina⁶. My argument will unfold in three parts. First, I place the *Octavia* in its context as a *fabula praetexta*, illustrating how

6 The *Octavia* might even form a point of contact between Shakespeare and Lucan, offering a new perspective on an intertextual relationship that has proven notoriously vexing. On Shakespeare and Lucan, see Gillespie 2001; Hadfield 2005; and Burrow 2013, 21, 30.

the play, as a result of its generic affiliation and political-literary context, contests the stories that the Romans told themselves about their history in the first century CE. Next, I demonstrate that Shakespeare encountered the *Octavia* mediated through a Renaissance interpretive tradition that read Agrippina's prophecy as a vector for Christian providential justice. Finally, I argue that, in *Richard III*, Shakespeare engages with the *Octavia*'s historiographical debate by reworking Agrippina in Margaret of Anjou – an unrecognized site of Senecan appropriations. By showing how Margaret's Octavian curses are fulfilled, Shakespeare recovers the *Octavia*'s unrealized potential for female voices from the margins to purge the sins of tyranny and shape the arc of a nation's history.

Fabulae Praetextae: Roman Historical Drama and Imperial Philosophies of History

The *Octavia*'s marginal place in early modern studies stems, in part, from the preoccupations of classical scholars. Confronted with the play's anomalies, classicists initially relegated it to the periphery of critical interest⁷. Yet by prompting scholars to veer away from thorny questions of authorial intent, the rise of reception studies in classics has inspired a "renaissance of interest" in this pseudepigraphic tragedy (Ginsberg 2016, 4). Rolando Ferri and A. J. Boyle argue that the play espouses post-Neronian political propaganda, setting the peaceful Flavians apart from their ruthless Julio-Claudian predecessors (Ferri 2003, Boyle 2008). Patrick Kragelund contends that the *Octavia* is consistent in form and structure with republican *praetextae*, painstakingly reconstructing a Roman genre despite the scant evidence that survives (Kragelund 2016, 3-360). Lauren Donovan Ginsberg and Emma Buckley demonstrate that the play marshals Vergilian and Lucanic intertexts to present Nero's feud with his closest relatives as a replay of Aeneas' killing of Turnus and the civil war between Caesar and Pompey (Ginsberg 2013; Ginsberg 2016; Buckley 2013). These re-

7 The play's anomalies extend beyond its non-Senecan authorship, political context, and generic affiliations. It also features a famously disjointed sequence of scenes; includes both Nero and Seneca as characters; and often quotes Senecan philosophy nearly verbatim.

cent scholarly interventions have brought about a paradigm shift in critical approaches to the play. We are now inclined to read the Flavian drama in connection with historiography, epic, and other *praetextae* as much as authentically Senecan tragedies.

These developments in classical scholarship position the *Octavia* as a point of contact between the Renaissance stage and the ancient performance tradition of Roman *praetextae*. A mainstay of Roman drama from the third century BCE onward, *praetextae* initially formed a vehicle to memorialize Rome's political and military victories. Republican *praetextae* were commissioned to be performed at ritualistic occasions: "self-congratulatory events" like triumphs and funerals (Ginsberg 2015a, 216) as well as the military-religious celebration of the *ludi sollemnes*, a series of performances that affirmed Roman civic identity and the special favor afforded to the fledgling nation by the gods (Kragelund 2016, 25). As a result, despite the scarcity of surviving examples, scholars nearly unanimously agree that republican *praetextae* – a tradition to which every major tragedian of the period contributed – adopted a "celebratory" tone (Ginsberg 2015a, 216). Kragelund convincingly shows that these plays often eschewed tragic material altogether to dramatize the conquests and "exploits of the *populus Romanus* under the brave leadership" of distinguished generals and politicians (Kragelund 2016, 100)⁸. As late as the Augustan period, ancient literary critics stressed the distinction between the victorious outlook of *praetextae* and the *pathos*-inducing sorrow of mythological tragedy. Horace's *Ars Poetica* explains that the purpose of a *praetexta* is to "celebrate domestic deeds" ("celebrare domestica facta", *AP* 287), while *fabulae crepidatae* (Roman tragedies on Greek mythological topics) stir up powerful pity through moving displays of sorrow ("cor spectantis tetigisse", *AP* 98)⁹.

These differences extend to *praetexta*'s dramatic treatment of time. The ritualistic settings at which these plays were staged – with their

8 This celebratory outlook also reflects a sense of national pride around the distinctly Roman invention of *praetexta*, a genre without any direct Greek precedent (Ginsberg 2015a, 220). The victorious march of Roman military-political progress mirrors the triumphant arc of literary history, in which Roman playwrights outdo their Greek forebears.

9 I quote from the translation in Ginsberg 2015a, 220. I cite from Wickham and Garrod's edition of Horace's works (1922).

explicit goal of drumming up civic pride – encouraged playwrights to craft sweeping narratives of Roman progress that took an expansive view of the triumphant trajectory of the nation's history. As a result, while mythological dramas tend to adhere to the compressed timeframe championed by Aristotle's three unities, *praetextae* recount "a sequence that reaches far beyond the temporal framework of the drama itself" (Kragelund 2016, 142). Accius' fragmentary *Brutus*, for example, juxtaposes the Roman king Tarquin's grip on power – illustrated by his unavenged murder of Brutus' brother – with predictions of Roman republican glory that come to the tyrant in a dream (*Brutus* frag. i Klotz). The play enacts a perspectival separation between the delusional king, who maintains that his rule will persist unchallenged, and the Roman audience, who recognizes the veracity of the drama's predictions of his looming defeat. *Brutus* is not the only *praetexta* to employ this technique. Anonymous dramas about the *Nonae* and the *Magna Mater*, as well as Accius' *Decius*, Pacuvius' *Paullus*, and Balbus' *Iter*, likewise expand beyond a tightly focused temporal scope to gesture instead to "aetiological causes and ensuing consequences" (Kragelund 2016, 142). In contrast to Greek historical dramas like Aeschylus' *Persae* or Phrynichus' *Sack of Miletus*, which hone in on discrete historical episodes, the fusion of past, present, and future central to *praetextae* encourages audiences to locate the plays' narratives within a sweeping historical context. Interrogating the process of narrativizing history is built into the generic code of these Roman dramas.

The *Octavia* takes up *praetexta*'s project of historiographical inquiry within a Silver Age literary culture invested in questioning the authorizing mythology of Augustan *imperium sine fine*¹⁰. For the *Octavia*-poet and his fellow imperial authors, the realities of empire suggested that the plot of Roman history might be a tragic one, driven by the cyclical strife that the Julio-Claudians claimed to have ended once and for all. Such anxieties were widespread. Horace's *Epodes*, published a year after Octavian's victory at Actium (31 BCE), pronounce civil war to be Rome's inevitable fate, a consequence of Romulus' primal fratricide

10 It is difficult to generalize about how imperial *praetextae* before the *Octavia* responded to this tension because such little evidence survives. Besides the *Octavia*, we only have seven brief references to performances of imperial *praetextae*.

(*Epodes* 7.17-20)¹¹. Vergil's *Aeneid* suggests that the quasi-civil wars that Aeneas wages against his distant Italian relatives have embedded factional strife into Rome's national DNA (Marincola 2010, 186-87). Ovid frets that the Julio-Claudian dynasty resembles the House of Atreus, forever at war with itself (*Met.* 15.821-15.833; 15.855)¹². This theory of history gained particular traction in accounts of Nero's rule. Lucan's *Bellum Civile* exposes the false providentialism of Augustan teleology to implicitly equate Nero's reign with the civil conflicts of the late republic (*BC* I.33-45; Leigh 1997, 23-26)¹³. Tacitus, Suetonius, and Dio theorize the *discordia* that Julio-Claudian *imperium* inspires, concluding that "Nero makes war on his own city much more directly" than his imperial predecessors (Keitel 1984, 307)¹⁴. For these authors, Nero's violence against his imperial subjects provided an incontrovertible *exemplum* of the inexorability of Roman civil strife.

In its own account of Nero's reign, the *Octavia* pits this pessimistic strand of imperial historiography against the authorizing mythology that justifies Julio-Claudian rule. The play dramatizes a three-day period in which Nero marries Poppaea Sabina, quashes a popular uprising in protest of his new bride, and sentences Octavia, his former wife, to death. Nero is the play's champion of imperial teleology. The emperor asserts a firm break between the bloody civil wars that drove prior Roman history and the teleological trajectory of empire. He suggests that Augustus' victory at Actium has ushered in an age of uninterrupted stability that he will maintain by ruthlessly eliminating political enemies. This despotic *pax Romana*, he claims, will culminate in his own deification (*Oct.* 530-32). In fact, by killing his own mother – a crime recounted in detail by the horrified chorus (*Oct.* 308-76) – he strives to script his own apotheosis: he eliminates the source of his earthly beginnings. The *Octavia*-poet thus adapts Senecan aesthetics to the generic code of *praetexta*. He conflates the Senecan tyrant's personal quest for absolute independence from the past with the Julio-Claudian claim to have replaced the violence of civil strife with the stability of empire.

11 I cite from Garrison's 1991 edition of the *Epodes*.

12 I cite from Tarrant's 2004 edition of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.

13 I cite from Shackleton Bailey's 1988 edition of Lucan.

14 See also Luke 2010, 514 and Lange 2023, 453.

The ghost of Agrippina systematically deconstructs Nero's authorizing mythology. She exposes the bloody transgressions that he suppresses from historical memory by literalizing the tropes of civil strife that he claims to have relegated to the past. Her shade forms a physical manifestation of the ghosts of civil-war victims that Nero asserts that the Roman victors buried in Egypt long ago ("nunc leues umbras tegit", *Oct.* 522). Likewise, in instructing Nero's henchman to plunge his sword into her womb ("condat [...] ensem", *Oct.* 370), she recycles the tyrant's own language to challenge his claim that the peaceful Julio-Claudians have sheathed the swords of civil war once and for all ("condidit [...] enses", *Oct.* 524-25). For Agrippina, the violence of the battlefield has merely migrated to conflict within the imperial family itself (*Oct.* 599-613). By cursing the emperor to be murdered at the apparent height of his power (*Oct.* 624-31), she mounts a Silver Age case for the untenability of tyrannical *imperium*, contending that the iterative bloodshed that enables his regime will inevitably rebound against him.

The *Octavia* concludes without fully resolving the tension between these competing visions of history. Agrippina's curses ("uota", *Oct.* 632) accurately forecast Nero's distant future. Indeed, later historians like Tacitus and Suetonius echoed her lines when they penned their own accounts of the emperor's demise (Boyle 2008, *ad loc*)¹⁵. Yet, within the play itself, authorizing voices drown out her prophecies. After she reappears to Nero's new bride in a dream to reiterate her dire predictions (*Oct.* 712-39), Poppaea's nurse misreads Agrippina's omens as portents of happiness, longevity, and lasting peace for the emperor and his second wife (*Oct.* 740-53; Boyle 2008, *ad loc*). Similarly, although Octavia and Agrippina level strikingly similar charges against him¹⁶, Octavia repeatedly denounces the murdered matriarch for her complicity in Nero's crimes; the emperor's mother had helped him carry out the string of killings that cemented his authority (*Oct.* 21-33; *Oct.* 91-97). She thus calls into question Agrippina's claims to moral authority as a victim of Neronian violence. Unscathed by their

15 Agrippina's curse thus differs from curses in authentically Senecan tragedies, which "are used to express an abundance of hatred, frenzy, despair, and grief, rather than to serve dramatic (i.e. foreshadowing) ends" (Clemen 2013, 57).

16 Cf. especially *Oct.* 609-10 and 959 (labeling Nero a *ferus tyrannus*) and *Oct.* 114 and 617 (deeming him an *auctor necis*).

critiques, the tyrant ends the play seemingly in full control of his future. After defeating a group of dissident citizens (*Oct.* 820-76), he imposes on Octavia a death sentence explicitly framed as a reenactment of his matricide (*Oct.* 908-10).

By inscribing a series of historically accurate predictions in a dramatic plot that leaves them unrealized, the *Octavia*-poet crafts a historiographical debate that invites subsequent intervention. For Flavian and Renaissance readers alike, aware of the truth of Agrippina's predictions, the ghost serves as a figure for the transition between dynasties. The scorned mother is simultaneously a witness to the horrors of Neronian rule and a prophetess for the eventual purgation of the tyrant's sins. Of all the vengeful shades that haunt Senecan tragedies, she is uniquely preoccupied with the forces that shape historical memory: she painstakingly records the circumstances of her death ("semper memoria", *Oct.* 599) in a last-ditch effort to counteract the *damnatio memoriae* that Nero imposes on her. Her fixation on her posthumous reputation presents her rebukes as a meditation on historical memory itself, how she is (not) remembered. Invested with a keen awareness of her own position in narratives of Roman history, the figure of Agrippina encourages later playwrights to decide how to memorialize her: to side with Nero in undermining her curse and reasserting triumphant teleology or to stage the prophetic pull of her predictions and follow her in condemning the cyclical civil strife that enables tyranny.

*The Renaissance Octavia from Mussato to Shakespeare:
Strife, Resistance, Justice*

Although long overlooked by scholars, the *Octavia* was immensely popular in the Renaissance. Because it circulated widely in editions that included the entire Senecan tragic corpus – the eight tragedies that modern scholars attribute to Seneca, plus the *praetexta* and *Hercules Oetaeus* – the *Octavia* quickly became a fixture in humanists' libraries¹⁷. From the *editio princeps* in 1478 to the end of the sixteenth century, printers on the continent published more than 100 editions

¹⁷ On the manuscript tradition of the play, see Tarrant 1983, 378-81 and Herington 1958.

across at least nine countries and 25 cities¹⁸. Continental editions – including those printed by Sébastien Gryphe in Lyon and Christophe Plantin in Antwerp – circulated among well-educated English readers in the 1580s, even though the first Latin collection was not printed in England until 1589 (Machielsen 2014, 65n20; Mayne 2019, 3). Latin-less readers could consult Thomas Nuce's English translation of the play, which first appeared in 1566 and was anthologized in Thomas Newton's widely read collection *Seneca His Tenne Tragedies* (1581). In contrast to modern hesitations about the *Octavia's* disjointed structure or bizarre style, the Renaissance attribution of the play to Seneca meant that it was held in high esteem.

The *Octavia* taught the Renaissance that a nation's history could form a compelling topic for tragic drama. The first-known Renaissance tragedy, Albertino Mussato's *Ecerinis* (1314), takes its generic coordinates from the *praetexta* to dramatize the oppressive reign and abrupt downfall of the Neronian tyrant Ezzelino III of Padua. For Mussato, Senecan aesthetics offered a way of making sense of his city's recent past: Ezzelino's wickedness offers a real-life confirmation of the psychology of mythological tyrants like Seneca's Atreus, while the trademark Senecan technique of *semper idem* – the cyclical, escalating criminality common in Senecan drama (Ginsberg 2015b, 200 n. 4) – helps explain the iterative bloodshed that the Paduan tyrant inflicts on his own city. This mode of historical tragedy was a runaway success. Mussato's play was performed every Christmas at Padua's main piazza and frequently anthologized in Italian manuscript collections as "Seneca's eleventh tragedy" (Boyle 2008, lxxvi). In these collections, it often appeared immediately after the *Octavia*, its classical counterpart in tragic history (Kragelund 2016, 365).

The *Octavia* played a foundational role in English theatrical culture, too. The first-known English Renaissance tragedy, Thomas Norton and Thomas Sackville's *Gorboduc* (1565) was an English *praetexta*. The play imitates the *Octavia's* generic coordinates to dramatize an episode from British pre-history, complete with a raging tyrant, a popular uprising, and a cast of political advisors who try, in vain, to restrain the ruler from slaughtering his own

¹⁸ Figures gathered from the Universal Short Title Catalogue.

citizens. The *Octavia* soon became a mainstay of the English Renaissance stage. A recent commentary, for example, lists 23 tragedies that demonstrate clear debts to the *praetexta*. Although it was once considered a mere source of commonplaces or rhetorical flourishes, the *Octavia* has recently reclaimed an important place in Shakespeare's library. Critics now confidently identify references to specific passages and scenes in such varied plays as *Romeo and Juliet*, *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, *Titus Andronicus*, *Julius Caesar*, *Coriolanus*, and *Cymbeline* (Boyle 2008, lxxviii -lxxix). Generically, the *Octavia*'s treatment of historical topics offered Shakespeare a precedent for both his ten history plays and his three Roman tragedies, not to mention *Richard III*, whose fusion of history and tragedy signals its Octavian inheritance in no uncertain terms (Burrow 2013, 169). Nearly half of the playwright's works, then, draw on the *praetexta*. In some sense, this is unsurprising: the *Octavia* formed the only classical history play that Shakespeare could have accessed¹⁹. As the preeminent ancient model of historical theater, the *praetexta* exerted a pervasive influence on the dramatic production of Shakespeare's England.

When they read the *praetexta* in Latin, Shakespeare's contemporaries encountered a paratextual apparatus that presented Agrippina's vengeful prophecies as morally justified and ripe for fulfillment. Despite her ethically dubious complicity in Nero's crimes, the popular moral-philosophical commentaries composed by the Oxford humanist Nicholas Trevet (1315-1316) read her as a righteous Fury, poised to enact God's will (Junge 1999, 34). The humanist printer Jodocus Badius Ascensius, whose commentaries aimed for the "familiarization and domestication" of classical texts (White 2013, 75), interpreted her as a champion of the ethical precepts of the Ten Commandments. For Badius, the eventual fulfillment of her revenge illustrated the obligations of filial duty: "Scriptum enim est, honorate patrem & matrem, vt sitis longæui super terram" ("For it has been written, honor your father and your mother, so that you may

19 Athenian and Hellenistic historical tragedies did not circulate in Latin or English translations in sixteenth-century England, and his "small Latin and less Greek" would almost certainly have prevented him from reading them in the original.

live for a long time on earth", Seneca 1514, CCXVIII^r)²⁰. These moralizing glosses separated Agrippina from the raging shades of the authentic Senecan corpus; humanists read those ghosts – especially *Thyestes'* Tantalus and *Agamemnon's* Thyestes – as embodiments of hatred and wickedness²¹. In fact, for learned commentators, Agrippina's proto-Christian martyrdom accentuated the inevitability of her vengeful predictions. Early modern editions often noted the echoes between her prophecy of vengeance and historical accounts of Nero's subsequent death, Eutropius and Suetonius chief among them (Seneca 1514, CCXVIII^r-CCXVIII^v)²². By presenting the ghost as a figure of divine retribution, humanist commentators suggest that her prophecy stands poised to bring the trajectory of Roman history in line with the arc of Christian providential justice.

Inspired in part by these moralizing interpretations, early modern playwrights often aimed to parse Agrippina's indeterminate ethical status: as a willing accomplice turned vehement critic of Nero, she invites subsequent authors to resolve her moral contradictions. Mussato's *Ecerinis*, which reworks her in the tyrant's mother Adelaide (Locati 2006, 150), presents Agrippina as a harbinger of Christianizing salvation. *Ecerinis* explicitly attributes the despot's sudden death to his mother's redemptive predictions, which free Padua from oppression and illustrate the city's position of divine favor²³. This salvific interpretation, however, was not unanimous. *Gorboduc*

20 All translations of Renaissance *Octavia* commentaries are my own. I silently expand abbreviations and write ampersands as "et." Ascensius quotes from Exodus 20:12, as rendered into Latin in the Vulgate Bible: "Honora patrem tuum et matrem tua, ut sis longevus super terram" ("Honour thy father and thy mother that thou mayest be longlived upon the land"). The translation is from Swift 2010.

21 See especially Seneca 1514, fol. XL^r-XLIII^r and CLXXXIII^r-CLXXXIII^v.

22 For Trevet's quotations from Suetonius and Eutropius, see Junge 1999, 35-36. The *mise-en-page* of Renaissance editions, which often featured commentaries by Badius and other humanists and adopted a standard layout, bolsters the readerly impulse to interpret the dramatic present in concert with subsequent history. By surrounding the text of the play itself with the commentators' glosses, Renaissance editions required readers to constantly glance back and forth between dramatic text and later historical context. See e.g. Seneca 1514, fol. CCXVIII^r-CCXIX^r.

23 See especially *Ecerinis* 505-507 and 521-36. I cite from Grund's 2011 edition of *Ecerinis*.

casts the filicidal mother Videna as a second Agrippina to opposite effect²⁴. After she outdoes her Octavian predecessor by stabbing her despotic son herself, the horrified British citizens deem her filicide the twisted transgression *par excellence*, rebelling against her and her husband instead of the tyrant. This Agrippina outstrips even Nero's penchant for evil.

In *Richard III*, Shakespeare sidesteps the tendency to read Agrippina through a moralizing lens. The play is not particularly interested in probing whether Margaret is sympathetic or corrupt, sinned against or sinning. Shakespeare insists that she is both, and her ethical multivalence contributes to the inscrutability that helps render her a compelling presence on the English stage. Instead, Shakespeare amplifies scattered hints of a transhistorical connection between the *Octavia's* Agrippina and Richard's anti-tyrannical dissidents embedded in prior dramas about the English tyrant's reign. In Thomas Legge's neo-Senecan *Richardus Tertius* (1579), for example, Richard is repeatedly deemed a second Nero and the tyrant's female objectors quote the *Octavia's* women nearly verbatim²⁵. But it is Queen Elizabeth who channels the royal mother's vengeful spirit. A furious ma-

24 Like her Senecan predecessor, Videna rails against her own son, the tyrant Porrex. She, too, utters an extended soliloquy that denounces the crimes that he committed to cement his power (*Gorboduc* IV.i.1-81) and envisions the hellish torments that he will endure after his death (*Gorboduc* IV.i.33-35; cf. *Oct.* 619-23). Indeed, her comment that her womb is cursed, "That the accursed Porrex brought to light" (*Gorboduc* IV.i.56) marks a nearly verbatim translation of Agrippina's command that Nero's henchman stab her womb, "which bore such a monster" ("monstrum qui tale tulit", *Oct.* 372; the translation is my own). In wishing that Porrex had stabbed her womb (*Gorboduc* IV.i.53-57; cf. *Oct.* 369-72), she laments that she did not suffer Agrippina's tragic fate. I cite from Cauthen's 1970 edition of *Gorboduc*.

25 On Richard as a second Nero, see especially *Richardus Tertius* III.3003, III.3569, III.4308, III.4537-38 and Norland 1993, 288. For the English women's echoes of the *Octavia's* female dissidents, cf. e.g. Elizabeth's "en, vindices mater deos supplex precor, / dirum caput flammis nefandis obruant" (As a suppliant mother, I pray to the vengeful gods: may they strike his vile head with unnatural fire, *Richardus Tertius* I.546-47) and Octavia's "utinam nefandi principis dirum caput / obruere flammis caelitum rector paret" ("Would that heaven's ruler would strike with fire / This unnatural prince's vile head!" *Oct.* 227-28). I silently expand abbreviations. I cite from Sutton 1993. Translations of *Richardus Tertius* are my own.

triarch who "seeks vengeance" ("vindictam petit", *Richardus Tertius* I.1268) for Richard's murder of her two sons, she echoes Agrippina as she confronts the tyrant. She declares, "at non potest matri scelestus parcere. / infame generi vulnus infixit suo" (But he is so wicked that he cannot spare a mother. He has inflicted a crime on his own family – an act of infamy, *Richardus Tertius* III.3942-3943; cf. *Oct.* 596-97, 609-10, 635). Although Elizabeth abruptly relents, grudgingly agreeing to marry her daughter to the tyrant, the play forces its audience to contend with the possibility that England's Nero might face retribution from the Octavian women scorned by his pursuit of power²⁶.

The anonymous *True Tragedy of Richard the Third* inches closer to acknowledging the predictive power of Agrippina's curse. In that play, the Agrippina-like Elizabeth seems to marshal supernatural powers to bring about the tyrant's downfall. Noticing that his arm has become "withered", for example, Richard interprets his deformity as evidence of her spell, exclaiming, "that accursed sorceresse the mother Queene hath bewitched me" (Field 1966, 33)²⁷. From here, the *True Tragedy's* Octavian points of contact become even more pronounced. Buckingham, dismayed at the tyrant's abuses of power, closely quotes Agrippina's ghost as he levels the play's only "curse" against Richard. His exclamation, "And after death thou maist more torture feele, / then when *Exeon* [*sic*] turnes the restlesse wheele" (Field 1966, 46) reworks Agrippina's wish for Nero's posthumous "torture to surpass [...] the flesh-ripping wheel of Ixion" (*Oct.* 621-23). These Octavian references show that, by restaging Agrippina in Margaret, Shakespeare taps into a longstanding literary-historical link between Richard, Nero, and the pseudo-Senecan *praetexta*. In prominent historical accounts like Edward Hall's *Union of the Two Noble and Illustre Families* and Holinshed's *Chronicles* – both key sources for *Richard III* – it became something of a commonplace to label Richard England's Nero. As Howard Norland notes, "like the Roman tyrant, Richard betrayed his mother" and "was believed to have caused the deaths of his brother Clarence and his wife Ann as well as the deaths of his nephews" (Norland 1993, 294).

26 On *Gorboduc* and *Richardus Tertius'* Senecan treatments of English history as a precursor to *Richard III*, see also Ullyot 2008.

27 See also Field 1966, 49.

Richard III is not Shakespeare's only foray into receptions of the Octavian Agrippina. He repeatedly invokes the emperor's matricide as the ultimate violation of the bonds of family and country. Hamlet, for example, considers a Neronian paradigm as he prepares to confront his own royal mother. In a speech that drips with Senecan horror ("Tis now the very witching time of night / When [...] hell itself breaks out / Contagion to this world. Now I could drink hot blood", *Hamlet* III.ii.378-81), he steels himself to "let not ever / The soul of Nero enter this firm bosom". Instead, he resolves, "I will speak daggers to her, but use none" (*Hamlet* III.ii.384-86). Additional parallels link Rome and Denmark. Like Agrippina, Gertrude is the target of her son's excessive, possibly even incestuous, affections; she, too, faces accusations that she poisoned her husband and lived with his brother (Thompson and Taylor 2016, *ad loc*). The unrealized specter of Octavian matricide haunts this scene, poised to double the fissures within the Danish royal house by matching Claudius' fratricide with maternal slaughter and condemning Denmark to the cyclical strife that triumphs in the Roman historical tragedy.

In *Julius Caesar*, Shakespeare turns to the *Octavia* to dramatize the inescapability of factional violence. As A. J. Boyle has demonstrated, Calphurnia's account of her nightmarish vision of her husband Caesar's bleeding statue restages Poppaea's account of her own nightmare, in which the ghost of Agrippina shows her a gruesome vision of her husband Nero's bloody death (*JC* II.ii.83-90; *Oct.* 712-33; Boyle 2008, lxxxii). Both Calphurnia and Poppaea recount their dreams to skeptical audiences whose interpretations of these dire portents are so optimistic as to strain credulity. Poppaea's nurse insists that Agrippina's hellish omens are signs of Nero's future health and prosperity (*Oct.* 740-53), while the conspirator Decius – intent on coaxing Caesar to the Forum – asserts that the image of the ruler's bloody statue is a "vision fair and fortunate" (*JC* II.ii.84) that "signifies that from you great Rome shall suck / Reviving blood" (*JC* II.ii.87-88). As a result, just as the nurse urges Poppaea to marry Nero despite Agrippina's nightmarish predictions, Decius maintains that Calphurnia's dream should not deter Caesar from traveling to the Senate House (*JC* II.ii.83-90). In the *Octavia*, Poppaea remains skeptical of the nurse's rosy interpretation of Agrippina's prophecies; she ends the scene unsure whether she should go through with her marriage to Nero (*Oct.*

756-61). Shakespeare replaces Poppaea's lingering hesitations with enthusiastic assent: Caesar, eager to bolster the illusion of his invulnerability, confidently resolves to venture to the Forum (*JC* II.ii.105). Yet, even so, Shakespeare confirms the dream's Agrippina-inspired prophecy of Caesar's murder. The dictator's ensuing assassination reveals the lingering tensions that lurk under the veneer of stability at Rome, launching the series of civil wars against which the Octavian Nero promotes the illusion of imperial unity. Shakespeare thus scripts a prehistory of the *Octavia* to locate the origins of its cyclical civil violence in the strife that divided late republican Rome.

If *Julius Caesar* dramatizes the *Octavia's* conflict-ridden past, *King John* traces the bloody replays of Neronian strife in subsequent history. Decrying England's vicious civil wars, Richard Plantagenet, the play's moral center of gravity, excoriates the feuding factions by labeling them "bloody Neroes, ripping up the womb / Of your dear mother England" (*KJ* V.ii.152-53). Conflating violence within the family and the state ("mother England") to comment on a prior set of English civil wars that erupted during the reign of Richard's predecessor, *King John's* reference to Agrippina suggests the playwright's sustained interest in reading English civil strife alongside its Roman precursor. In search of a symbol that epitomizes the factional conflicts that prefigure the Wars of the Roses, Shakespeare turns to the matricidal violence of Neronian Rome. For Shakespeare, English civil bloodshed formed yet another iteration of the strife that plagues the imperial play-world of the *Octavia*.

Shakespeare's Agrippina: Margaret's Curse and Richard III's Octavian Philosophy of History

Scholars have long considered *Richard III* to be Shakespeare's most Senecan play (Boyle 1997, 148; Muir 2005, 37; Miola 1992, 72-92). In this section, I extend scholarly accounts of the drama's Senecanism by arguing that Shakespeare imports the Octavian Agrippina to stage a conflict over the narrative arc of English history. Reflecting on Richard's reign while living under Tudor rule, Shakespeare marshals the *praetexta* to reframe the tyrant's proclamations of peace as propaganda designed to disguise the continuation of the Wars of the Roses. By reimagining Agrippina in Margaret, Shakespeare draws on her

cyclical philosophy of history to expose the hollowness of Richard's fictions of post-war stability. In doing so, he transforms his pseudo-Senecan source. He fulfils Agrippina's predictions of iterative strife, recovering the unrealized Octavian potential for female voices from the margins to expiate the sins that enable tyranny. In a theatrical culture intent on dramatizing the "unruly female speech" that challenges patrilineal hierarchies (Traub 2001, 130), the *Octavia* invites Shakespeare to imagine that the subversive utterances of marginalized women shape the course of English history.

Critics often focus on Richard's engagement with his personal past: how his perception of his premature birth and resulting deformity informs his belief that he is "determined to prove a villain," for example (*R3* I.i.30; Adelman 1992, 1-10; Garber 1988, 28-51). But the aspiring tyrant also manipulates the story of English history. In wooing Anne, for example, he claims, "I did kill King Henry, / But 'twas thy beauty that provoked me [...] / 'twas I that stabbed young Edward, / But 'twas thy heavenly face that set me on" (*R3* I.ii.182-85). He thus recasts even his most objectionable acts of civil strife as signs of his aspirations to unity across factional lines, evidence of his "love" for his Lancastrian foe. Richard likewise announces to the fuming Margaret that his slaughter of the defenseless Lancastrian Prince Edward enacted God's will ("And God, not we, hath plagued thy bloody deed", *R3* I.iii.180). In cases like these, Richard's manipulation of the historical record is hardly subtle. Prominent chronicle accounts like *Holinshed* and *Hall* uniformly condemned Edward's murder as an act of petty cruelty; in Shakespeare's dramatization of this moment in *3 Henry VI*, even the Yorkist King Edward worries that Richard and his accomplices have gone too far (Lucas 2013, 215; *3H6* V.v.12-343). By incorporating this murder into a narrative of moralistic closure and divinely ordained victory, Richard untethers himself from both the dictates of prior English history and his own dramatic past as represented by Shakespeare himself. In asserting a radical separation between the country's war-torn past and conciliatory present, England's Nero crafts a historiographical extension of his psychological compulsion to insulate himself from his own origins²⁸.

28 On this psychological compulsion, see especially Berkeley 1963 and Charnes 1993, 20-69.

But it is Buckingham who provides the play's fullest account of Richard's authorizing mythology. As he aims to convince the gullible mayor to accept Richard as king, Buckingham manipulatively chides the usurper for refusing the crown. Acting at Richard's behest, in a scene carefully choreographed by the tyrant, he exclaims,

Know then, it is your fault that you resign [...]

The scepter'd office of your ancestors,

Your state of fortune, and your due of birth,

The lineal glory of your royal house,

To the corruption of a blemish'd stock. (*R3* III.vii.116-21)

Assertions of Yorkist teleology abound. In Buckingham's story, Richard's coronation stands poised to restore the proper line of dynastic succession ("the scepter'd office of your ancestors", "your due of birth", "the lineal glory of your royal house"), rescuing England from the bloody contingencies of wartime usurpation with his ascent to the throne. The horticultural metaphor of "blemish'd stock" imports overtones of organic rebirth to Buckingham's narrative. By erasing the corruption of the bastard Edward from the family's "lineal stem" (Siemon 2009, *ad loc*), Richard's succession promises to regenerate the wilting family tree. Indeed, Buckingham's speech traffics in the language of medical healing. He declares, "The noble isle doth want her proper limbs; / Her face defaced with scars of infamy" (*R3* III.vii.124-25), yet concludes that Richard's reign will "recure" the nation's gruesome injuries (*R3* III.vii.129). He invokes the civil-war trope of division within the body politic only to reject it: the fissures within England's war-torn body politic will yield to the singularity of the new king's body. Buckingham thus presents Richard's coronation as a turning point in the country's history, replacing the iterative violence of civil war with dynastic stability that promises to usher in a period of national renewal.

Margaret draws on the *Octavia* to challenge this rosy vision of English history. Shakespeare signals the raging queen's Octavian inheritance from the moment she enters the tragic universe of *Richard III*. As she berates the Yorks for the crimes that they committed to secure their dynasty's power (*R3* I.iii.110-302), she emerges as a refraction of the ghost of Agrippina. Critics have long puzzled over the literary sources that inspired Shakespeare's deposed queen because

of her ahistorical presence in *Richard III*: by the time of the events of the play, Margaret was certainly exiled to France, and possibly even dead (Brooks 1980, 722; Stapleton 2006, 101, 104). At this point, scholars agree on the Senecan coordinates of her character (Perry 2020, 63-64; Ornstein 1972, 80; Bullough 1960, vol. 3, 221; Rossiter 1961, 420; Brooks 1980, 722-33; Stapleton 2006). But we can be more specific. In leading Richard's other disenfranchised victims in a ritualistic display of communal mourning, Margaret is a version of the Hecuba of Seneca's *Troades* (Boyle 1997, 148-49; Brooks 1980, 721; Miola 1992, 77-78; Stapleton 2006, 123; Perry 2020, 63). In her rebukes against England's Nero, she mirrors the *Octavia's* Agrippina.

Although only Stapleton (2006, 101) has raised the possibility of Octavian receptions here, the preliminary evidence is quite strong. It is well established that Shakespeare, in concert with the preceding dramatic tradition, reimagines the pseudo-Senecan Nero in dramatizing Richard, presenting Agrippina as a likely source of inspiration for the royal mother who curses him (Perry 2020, 49-65; Norland 1993, 285-300). Indeed, the *Octavia* offers the only example – not just in the Senecan corpus but in Roman drama altogether – of a raging woman who curses a tyrant for crimes committed to ease his path to political power. What is more, in dramatizing Margaret's appearance in Yorkist England, Shakespeare employs the distinctly Octavian technique of transcending the dictates of historical reality to import an anti-tyrannical critic to his play-world. Agrippina revels in her ability to transport herself back to Rome in defiance of the banishment that Nero imposes through his matricide (*Oct.* 593-95). Margaret, too, suggests that the pull of vengeance inspires her to disregard her exile and return to the center of royal authority in England (*R3* I.iii.167-72)²⁹. She likewise follows Agrippina's ghost in denouncing the tyrant for a brutal murder that deprives her of the role of mother; she rails against Richard's slaying of her son Prince Edward (*R3* I.iii.117-19, I.iii.199-200, I.iii.208; *Oct.* 598-613). Yet despite Margaret's self-presentation as an unjustly maligned victim, she and Agrippina

29 Agrippina is the only Senecan ghost who secures her own release from the Underworld; the other vengeful shades in the Senecan corpus are released by a Fury or external force. See especially *Thy.* 1-121 and *Ag.* 2. I cite from Zwierlein's 1986 edition of Seneca's tragedies.

both occupy complex ethical positions as they deliver their rebukes. They have each committed twisted crimes of their own, bestowing on them a twofold status of transgressor and victim that leaves them isolated and unpitied. The scene, as Kluge notes, lacks "an innocent point of view" (Kluge 2019, 165).

From here, Shakespeare's appropriations become even clearer. Margaret, too, announces her unexpected arrival from the realm to which the ruling dynasty has banished her (*R3* I.iii.167-68; *Oct.* 593-95); identifies herself as a horrid tableau of vengeful rage (*R3* I.iii.159-61; *Oct.* 593-95); laments her fall from grace (*R3* I.iii.154-61; I.iii.167-72; I.iii.201-05; *Oct.* 598-602; 609-13); exclaims that she remembers the crimes that the tyrant aims to expunge from the historical record (*R3* I.iii.117; *Oct.* 599); denounces him for depriving her of the position of royal authority that is rightly hers (*R3* I.iii.169-72; I.iii.201-02; *Oct.* 600-02; 609-13); frames his crimes as an affront to his mother (*R3* I.iii.230; *Oct.* 596-97; 609-13); asserts his hatred for his own relatives (*R3* I.iii.301; *Oct.* 608-09); hopes that he will suffer just punishment in hell (*R3* I.iii.142-43; *Oct.* 619-23); and issues desperate warnings about his future transgressions (*R3* I.iii.298-302; *Oct.* 624-28). Like the Octavian ghost, Margaret presents herself as a "prophetess" (*R3* I.iii.300) and ends her speech with a series of historically accurate predictions. She, too, prophesies that the crimes of civil war will redound against the ruling dynasty that committed them and curses the tyrant to suffer a sudden, violent death only after his sins have festered (*R3* I.iii.216-232; *Oct.* 624-31).

Margaret even quotes her Senecan forebear nearly verbatim. She remarks that she is haunted by the Yorkist transgressions that erased her identity as a mother: "I do remember them too well" (*R3* I.iii.117). She thus echoes Agrippina's denunciation of Nero's matricide, especially as rendered by Nuce: "I always do remember wel beneath / [...] Th'unkindly slaughterous deede" (Nuce 1927, 174)³⁰. Likewise, as she fumes that Richard's crimes have left her the roles of "neither mother, wife, nor England's queen" (*R3* I.iii.208), Margaret channels

30 The progression from Agrippina's "remember well" to Margaret's "remember [...] too well" perhaps signals Shakespeare's aim to surpass his Senecan source, suggesting that the English Agrippina's memory of past suffering proves even more agonizing than her Roman predecessor's.

Agrippina's outrage, in Nuce's translation, that Nero has deprived her of the roles of "Wyfe, stepdame, mother dire" (Nuce 1927, 176). While Margaret doubtless draws on other Senecan sources too, the Octavian royal mother occupies a privileged place in her literary genealogy. The ghost of Agrippina haunts Seneca and Shakespeare's plays alike³¹.

At first, *Richard III* seems poised to follow the *Octavia* in undermining Agrippina's curses. Margaret's rebukes inspire the Yorks to put aside their petty squabbling in favor of a show of dynastic unity, and they strive to relegate her to the margins once again. Dorset asserts her insanity ("Dispute not with her; she is lunatic", *R3* I.iii.253) and Buckingham attempts to silence her disconcerting outspokenness ("Peace, peace, for shame, if not for charity", *R3* I.iii.272). In subtly suggesting her imprisonment ("I muse why she's at liberty", *R3* I.iii.304), Rivers and his fellow Yorks reassert their aspirations to control her movements and bar her from the center of royal power. They propose a symbolic reenactment of her banishment to France. Richard, too, seizes on her frenzied rebukes to reassert the mythology of reconciliation and forgiveness that he has already begun to craft for himself. His declaration, "She hath had too much wrong, and I repent / My part thereof that I have done to her" (*R3* I.iii.306-07) inspires Rivers to conclude that he has reached a "virtuous and Christian-like conclusion" (*R3* I.iii.315). Margaret's Octavian critiques seem to be contained, cementing her relegation to the periphery and bolstering the Yorks' self-presentation as bringers of mercy and peace.

Yet the string of crimes that Richard continues to commit in the play confirms Margaret's assertions of iterative Yorkist bloodshed. In the mourning scene, she contends that Richard's murders have

31 Margaret is not the play's only Octavian dissenter. Anne initially imitates Octavia as she denounces Richard's wartime murders. She, too, mourns a father (here, a father-in-law) killed by the future usurper – even invoking his ghost (*R3* I.ii.8-10; *Oct.* 134-36) – and prays for the tyrant's violent death (*R3* I.ii.14-16; *Oct.* 227-231). Her exclamation, "heaven with lightning strike the murderer dead" (*R3* I.ii.64) recalls Octavia's prayer, already a favorite of Legge's, for Nero to be struck with vengeful lightning (*Oct.* 227-28; cf. *Richardus Tertius* I.iii.i.86-87). Yet Richard quickly incorporates her into his pursuit of teleological dynastic stability by convincing her to marry him. He converts her from Octavia to Poppaea.

transposed the violence of the Wars of the Roses to the factional strife that divides the ruling family. Her denunciation of Richard's wartime crimes ("I had an Edward, till a Richard killed him; / I had a husband, till a Richard killed him", R3 IV.iv.40-41) shades seamlessly into her condemnation of the tyrant's peacetime transgressions ("Thou hadst an Edward, till a Richard killed him. / Thou hadst a Richard, till a Richard killed him", R3 IV.iv.42-43), parallel in form and content. This time, her Octavian critiques prove contagious. Richard's mother, the Duchess of York, joins the group of dissident women as another Agrippina figure. In fact, she quotes the ghost nearly verbatim even before this scene. After learning of Richard's impending marriage to Anne, her exclamation, "O my accursed womb, the bed of death. / A cockatrice hast thou hatched to the world, / Whose unavoided eye is murderous" (R3 IV.i.53-55) recalls Agrippina's disgusted reference to her "womb, which bore such a monster" (*Oct.* 370)³². When she confronts Richard after the women's laments, she echoes the Octavian matriarch more extensively: she lists the woes that her tyrant-son has created for her (R3 IV.iv.166-75; *Oct.* 598-613); wishes that she had prevented him from being born (R3 IV.iv.137-39; *Oct.* 636-43); and catalogues the political crimes that he aims to suppress from historical memory (R3 IV.iv.145-48). She even utters a "most grievous curse" (R3 IV.iv.188) against him³³. Shakespeare thus doubles the Octavian ghost in *Richard III*, split between the disenfranchised queen who returns from exile to expose the civil violence that enables tyranny and the raging mother who denounces her own son for the crimes that he committed to secure his power. Out of the single figure of Agrippina, he creates a chorus of marginalized, anti-Neronian female voices³⁴. In doing so, he invites early modern audiences to grapple with the Octavian critiques that linger and multiply on the English stage.

32 This passage likely also refers to Videna's quotation of the same Octavian line (*Gorboduc* IV.i.56).

33 Before the Duchess' curse, Elizabeth seems poised to emerge as another Agrippina in her own right: she begs Margaret to "teach me how to curse mine enemies" (R3 IV.iv.117). Yet she soon reverses course and Richard's mother takes her place.

34 Shakespeare here fuses the *Octavia* with the ritualistic laments of the *Troades* (Stapleton 2006; Miola 1997, 76-80; Brooks 1980).

Most importantly, Shakespeare fulfills the prophecies of his Agrippina *within the play-world* of *Richard III*. Richard tries to flee the women's curses, yet he cannot escape their pull. Margaret's prophecies overthrow the seemingly all-powerful tyrant, and even his allies remark on their predictive veracity (Jowett 2000, 23; Alfar 2019, 800-01; Walen 2020, 635; Perry 2020, 64). In *Richard III*, "Now Margaret's curse is fall'n upon our heads" resounds as the drum-beat that drives English history³⁵. It is easy to read the fulfillment of the curse as a tidy, if not simplistic, plot device, part of Shakespeare's interest in manufacturing an over-abundance of prophetic hints to account for Richard's abrupt downfall. Yet the curse-come-true also represents a complex site of Senecan receptions. We have seen how *praetextae* like the *Octavia* construct a tension between the dramatic present and the prophetic future. While the immediate action of the play suggests that Nero's grip on power remains firm, the *Octavia's* readers understand that Agrippina's vision will triumph in the long term. Shakespeare collapses this opposition. By tethering the arc of his dramatic plot to the fulfillment of Margaret's prophecies, he allows his English audience-members to confirm, through their own spectatorly experience, her version of national history.

Helen Cooper argues that Shakespeare's first tetralogy transposes a triumphant narrative of Christian "salvation history played out over the whole of time, onto a century of the secular history of England" (Cooper 2010, 99). In suggesting that Margaret helps realign English history with divine providence, I have argued that Shakespeare's rewriting of the *Octavia* inspires him to present an immoral female dissident as a source of national deliverance, paving the way for the Tudors' redemptive ascent to the throne. As he crafts a prehistory of Elizabeth's reign that doubles as an etiology for the period of salvific reunification and stability over which she presided, Shakespeare reimagines Agrippina's ghost to dramatize the shift from Senecan *semper idem* to Elizabethan *semper eadem*. For Shakespeare, then, the *Octavia* provided both a plot ripe for appropriation in its own right and a conduit through which he accessed the generic norms of

35 See especially R₃ III.iii.14 and R₃ V.i.25.

*praetexta*³⁶. If the *Octavia* seems to undermine Agrippina's attempts to fashion herself into the play's internal director – capable of scripting Nero's future to align with her anti-tyrannical philosophy of history – Shakespeare stages this unrealized possibility by fusing the historical and prophetic time that remain at odds in pseudo-Seneca. In fact, as she brings about Richard's downfall through her curses, Margaret mirrors Shakespeare himself. The English playwright likewise stages Richard's defeat and memorializes, through *Richard III*, the crimes that the tyrant aims to suppress from the historical record. In appropriating pseudo-Seneca's historiographically-minded ghost, perhaps he, too, transforms into her.

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36 In *Richard's* relentless predictions of the tyrant's impending downfall, Margaret's chief among them, we can glimpse a link – albeit a faint, indirect one – between Shakespeare's tragedy and the anti-tyrannical prophecies of republican *praetextae* like Accius' *Brutus*. As Kragelund notes, those prophecies almost certainly formed a key source for Agrippina's curse in the *Octavia* (Kragelund 2016, 142).

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Juliet Furens: Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet as Senecan Drama

David Adkins

In what may be *Romeo and Juliet's* most frightening moment, Juliet imagines what it might be like to awake in a crypt. Juliet's nightmarish fantasy reads as Senecan, owing not least to her vision of Tybalt's ghost, an element that derives ultimately from Bandello. But though Shakespeare's version of the speech closely follows its sources, where it is original it greatly expands upon their Senecanism, culminating with a memory of *Hercules Furens*: rather than imagine the dead dismembering her, as in Bandello, Boaistuau, and Brooke, Shakespeare's Juliet fears that she, like the mad Hercules, will desecrate the bodies of her family, plucking Tybalt's corpse from its shroud and wielding a human bone as a club. If the play becomes a tragedy with the deaths of Tybalt and Mercutio, it is here that it becomes Senecan tragedy, for the Roman playwright haunts *Romeo and Juliet* to its end, hence Juliet's Polyxena-like radiance before death. This essay argues that *Romeo and Juliet* – a play that rarely appears in discussions of Shakespeare's reception of Roman tragedy – channels the terror and fury of Senecan personae, but also an attitude toward death that looks beyond Stoic resignation and toward transcendence.

Keywords: Juliet, Shakespeare's Sources, Imagination, Ghosts, Hercules, Madness, Transcendence

Romeo and Juliet has never figured largely in discussions of Shakespeare's Senecanism. In the late nineteenth century, John William Cunliffe noted the similarity between Juliet's vision of the dead Tybalt in Act IV, scene iii and Medea's encounter with her brother's ghost (Cunliffe 1893, 45). A few modern critics have remarked in passing on the possible influence of Seneca, or Thomas Newton's 1581 translations of Seneca, on the play, pointing to its use of the classical chorus, its scenes of highly rhetorical lamentation, and how the Nurse and Juliet verbally echo the Nutrix and Phaedra in Seneca's *Hippolytus*¹.

¹ See Hunter and Lichtenfels 2016, 13, 115 and Miola 1992, 181. In a *Notes & Queries* article, Anthony Brian Taylor notes that Juliet's "fiery-footed steeds" echoes John

But studies that focus on Shakespeare's reception of Seneca generally pass over *Romeo and Juliet* in favor of the other tragedies, all of which have received attention in light of their Senecanism². Insofar as *Titus Andronicus* is Shakespeare's most overtly Senecan play, the criticism on Shakespeare and Roman tragedy has only confirmed G. K. Hunter's argument that Shakespeare wrote *Titus* and *Romeo and Juliet* to establish "the extreme polarities of his tragic range" (Hunter 1974, 2), an evaluation echoed in Stanley Wells' statement that "*Romeo and Juliet* stands at the opposite extreme from *Titus Andronicus*. That was a classical, this is a romantic tragedy" (Wells 1995, 76).

But we can grant the general truth of this insight and still acknowledge that *Romeo and Juliet* has its own scenes of terror that would be equally at home in *Titus Andronicus*. In what may be the play's most frightening moment, Juliet, alone in her bedroom, imagines what it might be like to awake in her family's crypt:

Or if I live, is it not very like
 The horrible conceit of death and night,
 Together with the terror of the place –
 [...]
 Where bloody Tybalt, yet but green in earth,
 Lies festering in his shroud, where, as they say,
 At some hours in the night spirits resort –
 Alack, alack, is it not like that I,
 So early waking, what with loathsome smells,
 And shrieks like mandrakes torn out of the earth,
 That living mortals, hearing them, run mad –

Studley's "fiery footed horse" in his translation of Seneca's *Medea*, and that "too rash, too unadvised" echoes Medea's "O rash and unadvised foole" (Taylor 1987, 193-94). This article is the only work listed that has anything to do with Seneca in the section on *Romeo and Juliet* in *Shakespeare and the Classical Tradition: An Annotated Bibliography 1961-1991* (Walker 2002, 619-23). Jonathan Bate mentions Juliet in connection with Seneca's Stoic attitude to suicide (Bate 2019, 5). Gordon Braden does not address *Romeo and Juliet* in *Renaissance Tragedy and the Senecan Tradition* (Braden 1985), nor does Curtis Perry in *Shakespeare and Senecan Tragedy* (Perry 2021).

2 For instance, Curtis Perry covers *Titus*, *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *Lear*, and *Coriolanus* (Perry 2021); Jonathan Bate covers (among others) *Julius Caesar*, *Macbeth*, and *Anthony and Cleopatra* (Bate 2019, 46, 222-31, 233-51; on *Macbeth* see also Miola, 1992, 92-121). For *Timon of Athens* and its relationship to Seneca's *De Beneficiis*, see Wallace 1986, 349-63 and Finkelstein 2020, 801-25.

O, if I wake, shall I not be distraught,
 Environed with all these hideous fears,
 And madly play with my forefathers' joints,
 And pluck the mangled Tybalt from his shroud
 And, in this rage, with some great kinsman's bone,
 As with a club, dash out my desperate brains? (IV.iii.36-38, 42-45)³

The vision of Tybalt's ghost toward which the soliloquy builds is in fact only a small part of its richly Senecan texture. The mental scene that Juliet's imagination summons is thick with less obvious, but more interesting, Senecan ideas and associations. This essay first considers how Shakespeare reworks a passage in *Titus Andronicus* for Juliet's soliloquy, and then addresses how Shakespeare employs the source material in Bandello, Boaistuau, and Brooke to take advantage of their latent Senecanism: far from a mere pastiche of Brooke, the soliloquy in fact evokes specific moments from the ancient tragedian himself: Deianira's doubts about the shirt of Nessus, Astyanax's live burial and death, and most powerfully, Hercules' madness as he brutally murders his wife and children. The essay concludes by suggesting that Seneca's presence remains in the play until the end, and that Shakespeare looks especially to Polyxena's sublime radiance before death as a model for a dramatic climax that joins tragedy to transcendence. The question Shakespeare continually raises in *Romeo and Juliet* is not whether the lovers' tragedy is Senecan, but what kind of Senecan tragedy it will be, and which Senecan personae Juliet will enact as she performs her "dismal scene". *Romeo and Juliet*, I argue, channels a distinctly Senecan dread, but also a Senecan defiance of death that arises less from Stoic resignation than from a (perhaps equally Stoic) commitment to the transcendent.

Romeo and Juliet and *Titus Andronicus*

The central idea of Juliet's soliloquy in IV.iii, the fear that her surroundings will be so horrifying that she will lose her sanity and die, recalls a densely Senecan moment in *Titus Andronicus*, when the Gothic queen Tamora in effect bewitches the idyllic Roman forest as she incites her sons to murder Bassianus and rape Lavinia, his bride:

³ Quotations of Shakespeare's plays are from *The Arden Shakespeare Complete Works* (Shakespeare 2021).

And when they showed me this abhorred pit,
 They told me here at dead time of the night
 A thousand fiends, a thousand hissing snakes,
 Ten thousand swelling toads, as many urchins,
 Would make such fearful and confused cries
 As any mortal body hearing it
 Should straight fall mad, or else die suddenly. (*Titus Andronicus*, II.ii.98-104)

The *Titus* passage illustrates that the Senecanism of Juliet's soliloquy runs deeper than the tropes, rhetoric, and style common to any number of poets of the period. For Shakespeare evidently is composing the same kind of speech for Juliet that he (and Peele) had given to Tamora, a speech that directly imitates Senecan drama. Cunliffe notes that Tamora's speech is based on Seneca's *Thyestes*, specifically the description of the netherworldly grove where Atreus ritually slaughters Thyestes' sons (Cunliffe 1893, 70-71):

hic nocte tota gemere ferales deos
 fama est, catenis lucus excussis sonat
 ululantque manes. quidquid audire est metus
 illic videtur; errat antiquis vetus
 emissa bustis turba et insultant loco
 maiora notis monstra. (*Thyestes*, 668-73)⁴

(Here in the total darkness rumor has it that death gods groan; the grove resounds to the rattling of chains, and ghosts howl. Anything fearful to *hear* can be *seen* there. A hoary crowd walks abroad, released from their ancient tombs, and things more monstrous than any known caper about the place.)

A place for revenge and murder, the "barren detested vale" in *Titus* more exactly mirrors the dramatic situation of *Thyestes* than does Juliet's soliloquy. And yet there is reason to read that speech itself as bearing a direct relationship to the text of Seneca's drama. For arguably, Tamora's "thousand fiends" more weakly transfers the idea of a place haunted with ancestors' ghosts than does Juliet's worries about the "ancient receptacle / Where for this many hundred years the bones / Of all my buried ancestors are packed" (IV.iii.39-41), to-

4 Quotations and translations of Seneca's plays are from the recent Loeb edition (Seneca 2018). Where there are substantive differences, I print the text of a sixteenth-century edition (Seneca 1541) and adapt the translation accordingly.

gether with Tybalt's freshly festering body, as a place "where, as they say, / At some hours in the night spirits resort" (43-44). And if Tamora's fiends making "fearful and confused cries" "here at dead time of the night" are nearer to Seneca's gods groaning "hic nocte tota" (here in the total darkness) than anything in Juliet's speech, the latter's "as they say" hews closer to the sense of "fama est" than Tamora's "They told me", insofar as the former phrases, common in both Shakespeare and Latin poetry, always refer to rumor or popular tradition.

Demonstrating the relationship to not only Atreus' grove, but also to the place where Tiresias speaks to the dead Laius in Seneca's *Oedipus*, Curtis Perry argues that *Titus' vale* and its pit, which Tamora seems to create out of nothing, is Senecan psychologically as well as geographically. Part of the Senecan inheritance, he claims, was such subterranean caverns of the mind: "These arresting dramatic descriptions of secret psychological spaces [...] provide an impetus for proto-gothic imagery in English drama, where secret interior spaces represent hidden and monstrous psychological depths" (Perry 2021, 209). This historical insight may illuminate *Romeo and Juliet's* relationship to *Titus Andronicus*. Like Tamora, Juliet describes a real place yet transmogrifies its character through her strange powers of speech⁵. In the process she so bewitches herself that in the last four lines of her speech her vision suddenly advances out of the future and into her present, so that she sees – now, before her – Tybalt's restless shade: "O, look, methinks I see my cousin's ghost / Seeking out Romeo that did spit his body / Upon a rapier's point. Stay, Tybalt, stay!" (IV.iii.55-57).

In the event, the Capulet vault proves nothing like Juliet imagines, which is to say that the most frightening place in *Romeo and Juliet* is Juliet's mind. If the tomb is already a haunt for ghosts in the popular imagination ("where, as they say, / At some hours in the night spirits resort") it is in Juliet's mind that a scene of appalling deeds plays out in brutal and ghastly detail: Juliet plucking and playing with the dead's remains and shattering her own skull with a tall kinsman's bone. But note that Juliet herself is somewhat aware that the

5 Matthew Spellberg argues that "Juliet has a dream gone horribly wrong" because it "has infiltrated reality": "The passion of *Romeo and Juliet* has reinvigorated an artificial and stale world with the felt-closeness of dream; but as this passage announces, the constraints of reality rapidly transform the felt-closeness of dream into the suicidal claustrophobia of nightmare" (Spellberg 2013, 80).

source of these fears lies within her. She says nothing about what the spirits may do to her; rather her fears all concern what she may do in response to the “horrible conceit of death and night, / Together with the terror of the place”, a conceit and terror that draw power from the popular tradition about spirits in the night, whether or not that tradition is true. And perhaps Juliet is right to fear conceit, for this fantasy about losing her reason descends upon her with such force that her reason – in reality, in her bedroom – wavers as the vision of her cousin’s ghost overpowers physical sight.

It is this idea that a horrible conceit may overthrow reason and drive one to madness that provides the passage’s strongest connection to *Titus*. Tamora’s description of the vale and its creatures that “make such fearful and confused cries / As any mortal body hearing it / Should straight fall mad, or else die suddenly” (II.ii.102-04) seems strangely gratuitous, since her sons have already agreed to the murder and rape; it is perhaps calculated to create a fitting atmosphere for those crimes which will transform the place into precisely the hell she has imagined it to be: Martius later refers to “this detested, dark, blood-drinking pit” (224) unknowingly repeating her very word: “A barren detested vale you see it is” (93). Stranger still, the boy Lucius repeats Tamora’s idea that one may go mad under mental strain, this time applying it to the vale’s real victim, Lavinia, as he tries to account for why she follows him, frightening one she loves:

My lord, I know not, I, nor can I guess,
 Unless some fit or frenzy do possess her.
 For I have heard my grandsire say full oft
 Extremity of griefs would make men mad,
 And I have read that Hecuba of Troy
 Ran mad for sorrow. That made me to fear,
 Although, my lord, I know my noble aunt
 Loves me as dear as e’er my mother did,
 And would not but in fury fright my youth. (*Titus Andronicus*, IV.i.16-24)

Note that the young Lucius appeals to two sources of authority for this idea. He first defers to his grandfather, perhaps to the latter’s experience, but perhaps also to his knowledge of popular tradition, insofar as “I have heard” echoes Tamora’s “They told me” and Seneca’s “fama est”. But then the boy looks to his classical education, what he

has read in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, the very book Lavinia presently will use to communicate what she has suffered.

Juliet also appeals to popular tradition, first to what she has heard about spirits congregating in her family's ancestral tomb, and likewise to what she evidently has heard about the sounds of mandrakes causing those who hear them to "run mad", which she mentions in a simile to describe the likely effect of the unidentified shrieks she expects to hear (IV.iii.47-48). Thus, whatever the occult properties of mandrakes, the point of comparison must be "horrible conceit", and once again the idea that an extremity of dread may drive one to madness, even when that dread corresponds to no external danger and arises solely in the mind. This phenomenon is of course real, but more importantly for Juliet's purposes, it was believed to occur after encounters with dead bodies. In the *Anatomy of Melancholy*, Robert Burton discusses the effects of fear in ways strikingly relevant to Juliet's situation; fear, he says, may cause insanity and hallucinations:

It causeth many times suddaine madnesse [...] Feare makes our Imagination conceaue what it list [...]. We see this verified in most, as Lavater saith, Quae metunt [*sic*], fingunt, what they feare they conceaue and faigne vnto themselues, they thinke they see Goblins, Haggas, Divels, and many times become melancholy thereby[.] (Burton 1621, fol. I3r.)

And later he offers anecdotes about children whose encounters with corpses proved fatal:

At Basil a many of little children in the Spring-time, went to gather flowres in a meddow, and at the townes end, where a malefactor hung in gibbets, all gazing at it, one by chance flung a stone, and made it stir, by which accident, all the children affrighted ran away; one slower then the rest, looking back, and seeing the stirred carcasse wag towards her, cried out it came after her, and was so terribly affrighted, that for many dayes she could not be pacified, but melancholy, died. In the same towne another child beyond the Rhine, saw a graue opened, and vpon the sight of the carcasse, was so troubled in mind, that she could not be comforted, but a little after died, and was buried by it. (Burton 1621, fol. N2v.)

Though fourteen come Lammas-eve, Juliet reasonably worries over what might happen to her mind should she drink the potion and wake next to her rotting cousin. Here as in *Titus*, a moment of dis-

tinctly Senecan dread (comprising Senecan language and conventions) gives occasion for exploring fears based in popular belief and historical experience.

But the young Lucius cites Ovid's Hecuba as well as his grandsire on this matter, and Juliet's apprehensions about her potential reaction to the tomb's horrors are as literary and, I suggest, as Senecan as those horrors themselves. The dead already haunt Juliet's imagination in the play's modern sources, which are themselves thoroughly Senecan in atmosphere, reason enough for Shakespeare to return to *Titus* for his version of the episode. Sensitive to this Senecanism, Shakespeare intensifies it; his handling of the prior tradition is less like the mellification of a beehive than the meticulous splicing in the cutting rooms of modern cinema. As we will see, his variations on the source material not only make Shakespeare's Juliet fundamentally different in character from her predecessors; each is also a departure toward a closer and more specific correspondence with Seneca, as Shakespeare aligns her character with various personae of Roman tragedy.

Modern Sources: Bandello, Boaistuau, Brooke

Shakespeare closely follows Arthur Brooke's *Romeus and Iuliet* in Juliet's soliloquy of Act IV scene iii – so closely that the passage has been dismissed as pastiche:

Shakespeare remains Brooke's prisoner [...]. The speech is a pastiche of bits and pieces rearranged from lines 2337-2400 of Brooke's poem, and, although Shakespeare concentrates the material and makes some incidental additions [...] neither the additional material nor the speech as a whole rises imaginatively or emotionally much beyond Brooke's merely competent level. Somehow the moment failed to involve Shakespeare creatively. (Shakespeare 2003, 18.)

This evaluation does not do justice to how intelligently Shakespeare engages with Brooke and other predecessors in this soliloquy. To understand the passage's Senecanism we must appreciate the originality of Shakespeare's additions, but also how he looks past Brooke to Boaistuau and even Bandello. It is thus worth considering the historical development of this episode from Bandello to Shakespeare.

In Bandello's novella, Giulietta suffers a sleepless night before her marriage to Paris, revolving various thoughts in her mind. To-

ward dawn, she pictures Tybalt in her imagination, bloody and pierced through the throat. Then, thinking about being buried in her family's tomb and surrounded by dead bodies, her own body goes cold, her hair curls, and she trembles like a leaf in the wind. An icy sweat covers her limbs, "parendole tratto tratto ch'ella da quei morti fosse in mille pezzi smembrata" (Bandello 1560, fol. CC4r; it seeming to her at every moment that she was dismembered into a thousand bits by the dead)⁶. Giulietta then breaks into speech, and in a series of frantic questions doubts the wisdom of drinking the potion. What if she awakes before the friar and Romeo come? Will she be able to endure the stench of Tybalt's rotting body? If she cannot bear the sight of worms and serpents, how will she suffer them to touch her? At this point, she nearly empties the potion on the floor, but after raving (*farneticando*) with strange thoughts, at last, the sun rising and the thoughts driven out, she gulps down the potion and falls asleep (fol. CC4v).

In his French translation of Bandello, Boaistuau makes the dramatically effective decision to reorder the episode so that it begins with Iulliette's speech and climaxes with the imagined Thibault leading a crowd of dead and hostile kin. Lying on her bed, the young woman is encompassed with thoughts, along with "vne apprehension de mort si grande" that she does not know how to make up her mind (Boaistuau 1559, fol. i8r; an apprehension of death so great). Plaintively, she asks whether she is not the most unfortunate and desperate creature ever born among women, for in this world she has had nothing but misfortune, misery, and mortal sadness. She worries that, should the potion be mistimed, she will be a laughing-stock of the people. Here it is as if Boaistuau is working through Bandello in reverse, for Iulliette expresses anxiety over snakes and other venomous beasts, then the stench of the bodies, and then the possibility of awaking before Romeo and friar Laurens arrive. In any case, he is building toward the fantasy about Thibault, which he elevates to the power of vision: "son imagination fut si forte, qu'il luy sembloit aduis qu'elle voyoit quelque spectre ou fantosme de son cousin Thibault, en la mesme sorte qu'elle l'auoit veu blessé, & sanglant" (fol. i8v; her imagination was so strong that it seemed to her that she saw a ghost

6 Translations are my own where not otherwise noted.

or phantom of her cousin Thibault, appearing just as she had seen him when wounded and bloody). Imagining herself buried alive next to lifeless bodies and bones naked of flesh, her own tender and delicate body shudders, her hair bristles, and a cold sweat penetrates her skin. It then seems to her that she is surrounded by “*infinité de morts*” (fol. k1r; an infinity of dead ones) who pull her on all sides and tear her to pieces. Feeling herself diminished and fearing lest she be too weak to go through with it, “*comme furieuse & forcenée*” she drinks the potion, crosses her arms upon her stomach, and loses consciousness (fol. k1r; as if raging and frantic).

The corresponding passage in Arthur Brooke’s *Romeus and Iuliet* translates Boaistuau into English poulter’s measure, but does not stray far from his sense or even his phrasing and vocabulary. For instance, “*nouueaux* pensers commencerent à *l’enuironner*, avec vne apprehension de mort si grande, qu’elle ne sçauoit en quoy se *resouldre*” (fol. i8r; new thoughts began to surround her, with an apprehension of death so great that she did not know what to decide on) becomes

Where diuers *nouel* thoughts / arise within her hed,
And she is so *inuiroed* / about with deadly dred,
That what before she had / *resolued* vndoubtedly,
That same she calleth into doute. (Brooke 1562, fol. J2r)

Brooke renders “*craignant que, part trop grande debilité, elle ne peust executer son entreprinse*” (fol. k1r; fearing lest, on account of too great weakness, she could not execute her enterprise) as “Dreading that weakenes might / or foolish cowardise / Hinder the *execution* of / the purposde *enterprise*” (fol. J3v)⁷. Brooke manages to fit in virtually everything Boaistuau says, expanding for either poetic ornamentation, or perhaps to fill out a line or complete a rhyme. In Brooke, Tybalt thus appears “out of the hollow vaulte”, and is “A griesly thing to looke vpon”. Juliet’s sweat is “colde as mountaine yse” (fol. J3r). It is therefore all the more striking when Brooke stops short when translating Iulliette’s fantasy of dismemberment. In Boaistuau, the “*infinité de morts [...] la tirailloient de tous costez, & la mettoient en pieces*” (fol. k1r; infinity of dead ones dragged her on all sides and

⁷ Emphasis is mine.

tore her into pieces). Brooke softens the terror of this image by rendering it hypothetical: "A thousand bodies dead / haue compast her about, / And lest they will dismember her, / she greatly standes in dout" (fol. J3r). Contrast this with William Painter's 1567 translation of *Boaistuau*: "she thought that an hundred thousand deathes did stande about hir, haling hir on euery side, and plucking hir in pieces" (Painter 1567, fol. OOo3v).

Though the Shakespearean soliloquy is clearly based on Brooke, it still contains original ideas; it relies far less on Brooke than Brooke himself does on *Boaistuau*. The first thing a reader familiar with Brooke would notice is that Juliet does not feel sorry for herself. She does not ask herself, like Brooke's Juliet, whether there is

any one / beneth the heauens hye,
So much vnfortunate as I, / so much past hope as I?
What, am not I my selfe / of all that yet were borne,
The depest drenched in dispayre, / and most in Fortunes skorne?
For loe the world for me, / hath nothing els to finde,
Beside mishap and wretchednes, / and anguish of the mynde (fol. J2r)

Though she feels "a faint cold fear" thrilling through her veins that "almost freezes up the heat of life" (IV.iii.15, 16), and momentarily considers calling back her nurse, Shakespeare's Juliet turns from this impulse with noble resolve: "My dismal scene I needs must act alone. / Come, vial" (19-20) – lines worthy of Cleopatra, or any number of tragic protagonists. In keeping with this stoic magnanimity, Juliet does not simply fret over the efficacy of the potion like her predecessors, but readies a knife for that very contingency. After another original element, her fear that perhaps the Friar means to murder her (to which I will return), Juliet poses the traditional question about the possibility of waking early and imagines the various dangers and terrors she would have to face alone. While Shakespeare continues to rework Brooke, he also draws upon other predecessors. The phrase "horrible conceit of death" (37) may owe something to William Painter's "concept of grieuous Death" (fol. OOo3r) which translates the "apprehension de mort si grande" that *Boaistuau*'s *Iulliette* feels while lying on her bed. More importantly, with the lines "where, as they say, / At some hours in the night spirits resort" (IV.iii.43-44) Shakespeare seems to return to the episode's origins in *Bandello*:

“Non ho io sentito dir tante e tante uolte, che molte spauenteuoli cose di notte sono auuenute, non che dentro à sepolture, ma nelle chiese ò cimiteri?” (fol. CC₄v; Have I not heard it said time and again that many frightful things have happened, not only in graves, but in churches or cemeteries?). Though it leaves the “spauenteuoli cose” unspecified, churches and graveyards naturally suggest spirits, and the reference to a popular tradition about terrors of the night places Bandello’s passage in the same class as Tamora’s speech about the detested vale in *Titus* II.ii and its Senecan source in *Thyestes*.

Given that Shakespeare here intensifies the passage’s Senecanism by underscoring the supernatural element, replacing the usual snakes with spirits, it is curious that the speech builds toward a vision of Tybalt’s ghost alone, and dispenses with the crowd of dead kinsmen. At first it would seem that Shakespeare takes his cue from Brooke in softening the episode’s horror. But in fact he has exchanged the violent crowd of ghosts for something no less grotesque and perhaps still more frightening. For his Juliet experiences a dark fantasy of dismemberment every bit as vivid as Boaistuau’s Iulliette, but in this version, rather than suffer a violent end at other hands as innocent victim, she herself does the dismembering:

O, if I wake, shall I not be distraught,
 Environed with all these hideous fears,
 And madly play with my forefathers joints,
 And pluck the mangled Tybalt from his shroud
 And, in this rage, with some great kinsman’s bone,
 As with a club, dash out my desperate brains? (IV.iii.49-54)

In this waking nightmare, she commits the monstrosity of desecrating her kinsmen’s remains, and if a dead body sheds her blood, it is because she wields the bone. The speech still climaxes with the menacing ghost of Tybalt, but he now comes not for her but Romeo. This latter change, seemingly minor, follows from how Shakespeare has altered the entire spirit of the episode. Unlike her predecessors, Shakespeare’s Juliet does not begin by sinking beneath a sense of her own misfortune. And although the play (unlike Brooke’s poem) absolves her of all culpability – *were* she to go mad from fear she would be no less a victim than if she were dismembered by reanimated bodies – her soliloquy bespeaks at once a troubled conscience and a

powerful sense of agency. Her nightmare of what may happen in the tomb is the dismal scene she must act alone because she, no longer a child who cries out for her nurse, has come of age, and now must make her own decisions and face whatever follows, hence the knife⁸. And if her decision to violate the Capulet family honor by marrying a Montague not only results in a dead cousin but strangely manifests itself as sacrilege against ancestral bodies, then that is her tragedy, and she must play her part.

Ancient Sources: Senecan Drama

With its vision of undead and bloodthirsty Capulets, the episode as imagined by Shakespeare's modern sources is of course latently Senecan. I have mentioned how *Bandello's spauenteuoli cose* specifically resemble Tamora's Thyestean description of what happens in the detested vale at night. I now wish to demonstrate how Shakespeare expands upon this Senecanism by drawing upon specific moments of Senecan drama. The first two of these moments happen to resonate with traditional elements of the episode, and the third inspires his major departure from that tradition, namely his depiction of Juliet's imagined madness.

In *Boaistuau Iulliette* worries about drinking a potion whose virtue she does not know ("duquel ie ne sçay la vertu"), for should it last too long or too short, it may lead to dishonor: "Mais que sçay-ie (disoit elle) si l'operation de ceste pouldre se fera point plustost ou plustard qu'il n'est de besoing, & que ma faulte estant descouuerte, ie demeure la fable du peuple" (*Boaistuau* 1559, fol. i8r-v). As Painter translates, "but what know I (sayd she) whether the operation of this powder will be to soone or to late, or not correspondent to the due time, and that my faulte being discouered, I shall remayne a iesting stocke and fable to the people?" (fol. Ooo3r-v). Strangely, Shakespeare reworks the

8 "Juliet [...] finds herself faced with the choice between a father and a lover [...]. This election of identity is forced upon her by circumstance, but there is no doubt of her resolution [...]. Manifestly Juliet is neither hardhearted nor of an unloving disposition, yet she prefers the death of both her parents to the banishment of her lover" (Garber 1981, 39). Referring to IV.iii, Garber writes, "Juliet's resolve to conquer these fears marks a turning point in her growth to personal maturity; from this point she will no leading need" (220).

young woman's concern that taking the potion might dishonor her with a momentary suspicion that Friar Lawrence may have given her the potion to avoid his own dishonor by killing her:

What if it be a poison which the Friar
Subtly hath ministered to have me dead,
Lest in this marriage he should be dishonoured,
Because he married me before to Romeo? (IV.iii.24-27)

This suspicion is easily put aside as unworthy of her ghostly father: "I fear it is, and yet methinks it should not, / For he hath still been tried a holy man" (28-29). This somewhat paranoid fear that her confessor has planned her murder is perhaps somewhat less reasonable than her other fears – that she will wake too early, that she will suffocate, that she will go mad with terror – and would seem better suited to Brooke's poem, with its anti-Catholic prejudice.

But this fear of a poisoned potion nonetheless makes sense, for Shakespeare is rendering this traditional narrative as tragic drama, and as Juliet utters this question a Senecan memory surfaces. Shakespeare reorders the episode so that it begins with Juliet experiencing the same physiological sensations of fear her predecessors do: "I have a faint cold fear thrills through my veins, / That almost freezes up the heat of life" (15-16). By locating this just before Juliet's fear that the potion is poisoned, Shakespeare places Juliet for a brief moment in the role of Deïanira in Seneca's *Hercules Oetaeus*. Mad with grief that her husband Hercules has taken a mistress, Deïanira resorts to the blood of Nessus, which the dying centaur offered to her as a love potion ("virus" 536) should she ever need to win back her husband. After sending a robe smeared with the blood to Hercules, Deïanira describes her sudden fear that Nessus' gift may have been treacherous:

Vagus per artus errat excussos tremor,
erectus horret crinis, impulsis adhuc
stat terror animis et cor attonitum salit
pavidumque trepidis palpitat venis iecur.
[...]
Ut missa palla est tabe Nessesia inlita
thalamisque demens intuli gressum meis,
nescioquid animus timuit et fraudem astruit? (*Hercules Oetaeus*, 706-09, 715-18)

(Shudders run here and there through my shaking limbs, my hair bristles up on end, terror still lodges in my stricken spirit, my heart beats hard in shock, and my liver pulses in fear, its veins trembling. [...] After I had sent off the robe smeared with Nessus' gore, as I, raving, walked into my bedchamber, my mind formed a sort of fear, contrived a trick.)⁹

Deianira then tells how she tested the blood by exposing it to sunlight, whereupon it burst into flame, poisoned as it was by the envenomed tip of Hercules' arrow. But the discovery comes too late, for presently the message arrives that Hercules is violently convulsing with pain; a spectacular self-immolation to release himself from life becomes his final labor. Poison and suicide will be the end of Juliet's husband too, and it is the friar who contrives the deception (Juliet's simulated death) that leads to it. That deception is a kind of shirt of Nessus: Juliet was promised it would reunite her with her husband, but in the event she awakes too late to spare him the pain he can only defeat through suicide. That tragic mistiming is perhaps the most classical, if not specifically Senecan, element of the lovers' drama. Cruelly, what Juliet fears most – awaking early – is precisely what would have saved Romeo's life and her own. The extraordinary potion, in fact, is all too trustworthy; less trustworthy was what she took for granted as the ordinary intercourse of daily life: that letters would be sent, health would hold, people would arrive at the appointed time. It is thus that even a holy friar may become an unwitting Nessus, deceiving and self-deceived: because human plans are fragile enough that, for all Juliet's nightmarish anticipations of the tragic worst, she never saw it coming.

Though the correspondence between Juliet and Deianira plays out in interesting ways, the point of evoking Deianira's fear of treachery in Juliet's IV.iii soliloquy is to create an atmosphere of Senecan fear. Also contributing to this atmosphere is the idea of being buried alive. Though the plot device of the faked death is thoroughly Shakespearean, the fact that Juliet is laid in a tomb, with tragic consequences, resonates particularly with Seneca's *Troades*. The play opens in

9 Here I combine the Loeb translation (Seneca 2018) with Davis Konstan's (Seneca 2017) to better render the sixteenth-century reading of the text; a seventeenth-century edition glosses "astruit" as "asserit me deceptam esse posse" (Seneca 1665, fol. N10r; asserts that I could be deceived).

the immediate aftermath of the fall of Troy, when the Greeks learn they must once again sacrifice before they sail: the ghost of Achilles has demanded the Trojan princess Polyxena for his bride, and the seer Calchas has declared they must kill Astyanax too, lest the boy grow up to avenge his father and his city with another war. When Hector's shade warns Andromache she must find a place to hide their son, she decides to shut him in his father's tomb. She shudders at the thought much like Juliet: "sudor per artus frigidus totos cadit: / omen tremesco misera feralis" (487-88; A cold sweat runs down my body: I tremble wretchedly at the omen represented by the place of death). Advised by an old compatriot to tell the Greeks her son died in the city's fall, Andromache swears to Ulysses that "luce caruit; inter extinctos iacet / datusque tumulo debita exanimis tulit" (603-04; he [has] lost the light; he lies among the dead, and entrusted to the tomb he has received the due of those departed). Juliet has had her own premonitions about places of death. Her grotesque nightmare about lying among the dead came to her even before the friar proposed his plan:

O bid me leap, rather than marry Paris,
 From off the battlements of any tower,
 [...].
 Or hide me nightly in a charnel-house,
 O'ercovered quite with dead men's rattling bones,
 With reeky shanks and yellow chapless skulls;
 Or bid me go into a new-made grave,
 And hide me with a dead man in his shroud,
 Things that, to hear them told, have made me tremble,
 And I will do it without fear or doubt,
 To live an unstained wife to my sweet love. (*Romeo and Juliet*, IV.i.77-78, 81-88)

Leaping off the battlements is precisely how Astyanax will die in Seneca's *Troades*, as opposed to being cast down, as in other versions of the legend: "sponte desiluit sua / in media Priami regna" (1102-03; he leaped down of his own accord, into the midst of Priam's kingdom). And when Juliet returns to these dark thoughts in IV.iii, her vision of "dash[ing] out my desperate brains" likewise glances back at this Senecan moment. As translated by Jasper Heywood in 1559, "The head was shattered with brains dashed from within" (Seneca 1966). The subtlety of these allusions suggests that their Senecanism is less

about paying tribute than channeling a particular kind of dread, of which Seneca was the undisputed master. Seneca's philosophy shows him thinking about what actually scares people: in his discussion of earthquakes in *Natural Questions*, he identifies being buried alive as a widely shared and particularly intense fear:

There is no shortage of people who are more afraid of this manner of death, in which they fall into the abyss with their homes and are carried off alive from the ranks of the living; as though not every kind of death reached the same destination [...]

(Seneca 2010, 88)

The Senecan aspects of Juliet's soliloquy that I have considered thus far could have been inspired by the vaguely Senecan atmosphere already present in Shakespeare's modern sources. I now wish to return to the passage's most original element, where Juliet imagines desecrating the dead, and to suggest that one reason Shakespeare here diverges so dramatically from his modern sources is to directly engage with the *Hercules Furens*, a *locus classicus* for Senecan madness. As we have seen, Bandello, Boaistuau, and Brooke all depict their Juliets in a state of frenzy before she drinks the potion; it is only Shakespeare's Juliet who imagines going mad for fear in the tomb, evoking an atmosphere much like the one Tamora does in her fiction about the vale. We also have seen how the grotesque images of her fantasized madness result from a strange reversal, a perverse dismemberment, of the traditional source material, so that the dead tearing Juliet apart becomes Juliet tearing apart the dead. There is a small detail that discloses the Senecan origin and superimposes a Senecan persona upon Juliet's mental image of herself. It is the way Juliet speaks about her weapon: "And, in this rage, with some great kinsman's bone, / *As with a club*, dash out my desperate brains" (IV.iii.53-54; emphasis mine).

Hercules Furens depicts the tragic events following Hercules' return from the underworld. Suddenly struck mad by Juno, he cruelly slaughters his family moments after their joyful reunion. In his delirium, he sees his children as the sons of his enemy and his wife Megara as Juno; after shooting several sons with arrows he dashes one against the wall: "illi caput / sonat, cerebro tecta dispersa madent" (1006-07; his head smashes, the walls are wet, spattered with his brain), and then, after killing the small boy she was sheltering, brings his club

down on his wife's head:

in coniugem nunc clava libratur gravis:
 perfregit ossa, corpori trunco caput
 abest nec usquam est. (*Hercules Furens*, 1024-26)

(Against his wife now his heavy club is leveled; it smashed her bones, her head is gone from her truncated body, totally destroyed.)

After his madness runs its course, Hercules collapses in exhaustion and sleeps. To his horror, he awakes among the corpses of his family:

unde prostrata domo
 video cruenta corpora? an nondum exiit
 simulacra mens inferna? post reditus quoque
 oberrat oculos turba feralis meos?
 pudet fateri: paveo; nescioquod mihi,
 nescioquod animus grande praesagit malum. (*Hercules Furens*, 1143-48)

(why do I see bloodstained bodies in a ruined house? Has my mind not yet cast off images from the underworld? Even after my return does a throng of the dead wander before my eyes? I confess with shame that I feel afraid. There is some ill, some great ill, that my mind forebodes.)

Hercules awakes to a place of death not unlike Agamemnon's grove haunted by *ferales dei* and *vetus turba* (668, 671; gods of death, ancient crowd), and fears an omen like that which troubles Andromache. By shedding the blood of his family Hercules has created the same kind of unhallowed ground on which Agamemnon butchers his kin and that presages the brutal end of Astyanax. Juliet's soliloquy in IV.iii conjures up such a Senecan place and the dread it inspires, something shared by all three Senecan dramas alike, but it summons the specter of Hercules with particular force. It is true that the bodies she violently plucks and breaks apart are already dead. Juliet nevertheless commits a sacrilege upon the bodies of her family, and not just the dusty bones of her ancestors. Shakespeare's version is original in how largely Tybalt figures in the episode, naming him three times, and this is probably the reason why Shakespeare has omitted the crowd of the other dead. Though Juliet envisions Tybalt coming for Romeo, this occurs only

after she pictures herself violently plucking the “festering” and “mangled Tybalt from his shroud” (43, 52) as if she has awakened and enraged his ghost by disturbing its rest. Although she tells the Nurse that Romeo’s banishment is the worse word that she would forget, but that “it presses to my memory / Like damned guilty deeds to sinners’ minds” (III.ii.110-11), it seems that it is Tybalt who haunts the darker places of her consciousness, and it is telling that *this* is the metaphor that comes to her just before she wishes her parents dead.

When Shakespeare writes *Macbeth* ten years later, he will return to the *Hercules Furens* to find a language for the poetry of guilt¹⁰. Juliet of course is nothing like the Macbeths, even in her darkest fantasy. But the point of adding a fit of Herculean rage to that fantasy, I suggest, is that the kind of dread it evokes is one that comprises guilt as well as fear. Juliet imagines herself, like Hercules, awaking next to the dead bodies of her family, and then tearing them apart in a blind frenzy, because she fears that she too is a tragic protagonist who must awake, in a sudden anagnorisis, to the reality of her monstrous deeds, to a realization that she has violated her family’s sacred honor and is somehow to blame for Tybalt’s death. “My dismal scene I needs must act alone”. It is for this reason that her final victim is indeed one of flesh and blood, as she dashes out her desperate brains with a great kinsman’s bone – there is no better symbol for the ancient, ossified feud – in an act heavily reminiscent of Hercules cudgeling his wife with his club¹¹.

10 “quis Tanais aut quis Nilus aut quis Persica / violentus unda Tigris aut Rhenus ferox / Tagusve Hibera turbidus gaza fluens / abluere dextram poterit?” (*Hercules Furens*, 1323-26; 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 clean?) See Cunliffe 1893, 82, 84; Burrow 2013, 189.

11 Coppélia Kahn has made a similar point: “This waking dream, like all the dreams recounted in the play, holds psychological truth; it bespeaks Juliet’s knowledge that in loving Romeo she has broken a taboo as forceful as that against harming the sacred relics of her ancestors, and her fear of being punished for the offense by the ancestors themselves – with their very bones” (Kahn 1977-1978, 18). See also Paul A. Kottman: “By making a mockery of her family’s care for her dead body [...] she will not be able to see her dead family members as anything other than mere corpses [...]. Therefore, the cost of her freedom is high indeed. Not only must she outlive the claims of her living family members

Juliet's reference to acting a dismal scene suggests not only that Shakespeare is channeling the dread of a Senecan scene but that Juliet herself fears that she has become a Senecan persona and will experience a fitting tragic end. Just as the young Lucius points to Ovid's Hecuba, and Lavinia points to Philomela, so Juliet fears that, like Deianira, she has been betrayed; like Astyanax she will be buried alive; like Hercules she will violate, and already has violated, kinships' sacred bonds. Whether or not the Capulet tomb is visited by spirits at night, as people say, what is certain is that Juliet's mind swarms with the revenants of Senecan personae.

A Senecan Climax

The spirit of Hercules continues to stalk this play, as he does other Shakespeare plays, especially *Antony and Cleopatra*, as when Antony exclaims, "The shirt of Nessus is upon me" and prays to his ancestor to teach him his rage (IV.xii.43-44), or when mysterious music indicates the god is leaving him (IV.iii.21). That spirit descends upon Romeo as he performs Herculean furor to drive away his servant Balthasar:

By heaven, I will tear thee joint by joint
 And strew this hungry churchyard with thy limbs.
 The time and my intents are savage-wild,
 More fierce and more inexorable far
 Than empty tigers or the roaring sea. (*Romeo and Juliet*, V.iii.35-39)

a speech certainly delivered in "Ercles' vein" (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*, I.ii.36), and does so again, perhaps more authentically, when Romeo says to Paris, "Put not another sin upon my head / By urging me to fury" and "hereafter say / A madman's mercy bid thee run away (*Romeo and Juliet*, V.iii.63, 67)¹².

on her life, she must forsake the community of the living and the dead that binds her to others as human" (Kottman 2012, 32).

12 Robin Wells also observes that Romeo here speaks in "Ercles' vein," but argues that he continues in it even in his final speech, and that Shakespeare sets the "kitsch" of Romeo's "heroic pretensions" against the more compelling dark comedy of Juliet's final words (Wells 2005, 125-27).

The dramatic function of the lovers' Herculean moments is to raise the question of what in fact will happen in the tomb: will Romeo lose himself to rage when he sees what he takes to be Juliet's corpse? Will Juliet go mad, as she has feared, when she awakes not only next to Tybalt but the freshly dead body of her husband? If the lovers assume the role of Senecan personae in thought and deed, what sort of tragic end will they meet?

The lovers' final speeches capture an encounter with mortality that is utterly different from what Juliet feared. What Romeo says about the tomb seems directly to address and refute the nightmare of Juliet's IV.iii soliloquy. One must not call it a grave:

A grave – O, no, a lantern, slaughtered youth,
 For here lies Juliet, and her beauty makes
 This vault a feasting presence full of light.
 [...]

 How oft, when men are at the point of death,
 Have they been merry, which their keepers call
 A lightening before death. O, how may I
 Call this a lightening? O my love, my wife,
 Death, that hath sucked the honey of thy breath
 Hath had no power yet upon thy beauty.
 Thou art not conquered. (*Romeo and Juliet*, V.iii.84-86, 88-94)

It may be tempting to say that, for its resolution, this romantic tragedy decisively turns away from classical tragedy, that the Senecan ghosts have finally been exorcised. Tybalt is there in his "bloody sheet" (97), but lies at rest as Romeo begs his forgiveness. And for all the macabre language about death, poison, and worms, horror has been replaced by the lyricism of poetry and the wit of gallows' humor. The lovers are left to face the bleak reality of their situation, but with their sanity intact.

Nevertheless, although Seneca's dread does not hound the lovers to their graves, his tragedies contain more than one kind of climax, as Jonathan Bate has argued:

Seneca provided Shakespeare with three different models for the climax of a tragedy. There was the *Hercules Furens* model: the explosion of anger that is replicated in the fury of Mark Antony. There was the Stoic resignation, the serenity of acceptance, to which Hamlet comes. But there was also a

darker philosophy, a welcoming of death, seen especially in *Macbeth*. (Bate 2019, 230.)

I would suggest that Seneca offered Shakespeare a fourth kind of tragic climax, one exemplified by the Trojan princess Polyxena at the end of the *Troades*. Demanded by the ghost of Achilles for his underworldly bride, Polyxena is led by marriage torches to be sacrificed upon the hero's burial mound, tomb and wedding converging just as they do in *Romeo and Juliet*. Achilles as ghostly groom likewise offers precedent for Romeo's idea of amorous Death, "the lean abhorred monster [who] keeps / Thee here in dark to be his paramour" (V.iii.104-05). But Juliet resembles Polyxena most in her radiance before death:

Ipsa deiectos gerit
vultus pudore, sed tamen fulgent genae
magisque solito splendet extremus decor,
ut esse Phoebi dulcius lumen solet
iamiam cadentis, astra cum repetunt vices
premiturque dubius nocte vicina dies. (*Troades*, 1137-1142)

(She herself lowered her gaze in modesty, but her eyes were radiant nonetheless, and her beauty shone forth more than usual at its ending, as Phoebus' light is always lovelier at the moment of setting, when the stars take up the cycle and failing daylight is threatened by night's closeness.)

Juliet's "beauty makes / This vault a feasting presence full of light", and insofar as she, unbeknownst to Romeo, is at this moment nearing the point of death, his proverb about the "lightening before death" applies to her as well, for the phrase refers to luminosity as well as lightness of weight¹³. Polyxena-like, her life only gathers intensity as the darkness approaches, like the setting light of day. If death is the West, Juliet is the sun.

While Juliet and Polyxena – who both die by knife-wound – face

13 See the phrase "lightening before death" in OED, "lightening, n.1": "The phrase could perhaps alternatively be interpreted as showing *lightening* n.2 and may sometimes have been understood as such. However, parallel use of 'a glimmering before death' in Fletcher's *Spanish Curate* iv. v. strongly suggests that the phrase originally had the sense of 'brightness' rather than 'lack of heaviness' and so belongs here".

their death bravely, they share more than Stoic resignation and hence enact a different kind of tragic climax, one defined by its character of transcendence. Arguably it may be found at the end of *Hercules Oetaeus* as well, when Hercules, physically incandescent as he burns alive in his funeral pyre, lifts his eyes to the stars as he seeks apotheosis: “quis illum credat ad flammas rapi? / vultus petentis astra, non ignes erant (1644-45; Yet who would have believed him hurried toward the flames? His expression was that of one heading to the stars, not the fire)¹⁴. Indifferent to pain, he comforts his friends, who are smitten with wonder; “stupet omne vulgus” (The whole crowd stood in amazement) – the very words used to capture the atmosphere at Polyxena’s death: “stupet omne vulgus [...] movet animus omnes fortis et leto obvius [...] miserentur ac mirantur” (1143, 1146, 1148; The whole crowd was awestruck [...] all were moved by the braveness of her spirits, facing death head-on; they felt pity and marveled). It is such moments in Senecan drama that remind us that the tragedian is also a philosopher:

Weak and fluid ourselves, we stand in the midst of illusions. So let us direct our minds toward things that are eternal. Let us fly upward and gaze in wonder at the forms of all things [Miremur in sublimi volitantes rerum omnium formas], and at God, who dwells among them [...]. Let us spurn all those things which are so far from being valuable that it is in doubt whether they exist at all. (Seneca 2015, 170)¹⁵

Hercules and Polyxena thus become dramatic exemplars of a particular orientation to reality, of a mind that can penetrate the veil of contingency to marvel at the eternal and sublime. By dramatizing this idea, Seneca’s personae demonstrate what happens when such a mind is finally ready to shuffle off its mortal coil. It reflects and radiates, such that an atmosphere of dread is transfigured into one of awe¹⁶.

14 See Robert Miola on the absence of such a climax in *Othello*: “Nor does Othello die like the Hercules of *Hercules Oetaeus*, transfigured into a better existence. Instead, Shakespeare denied Othello all possibility of apotheosis” (Miola 1992, 141).

15 Latin text from Seneca 2018. On Seneca’s reception of Plato in this letter, and in this passage in particular, see Long 2017, 218-24.

16 Although in the Renaissance some believed Seneca the philosopher and Seneca the tragedian to be two separate people (Burrow 2013, 166), critics of Shake-

Such a climax will be given to Cleopatra (“I have / Immortal longings in me”; *Antony and Cleopatra*, V.ii.278-79). Whether or not the Veronese lovers expect their love to survive death¹⁷, their final moments are exalted by a sense of triumph:

Death, that hath sucked the honey of thy breath
 Hath had no power yet upon thy beauty.
 Thou art not conquered. Beauty’s ensign yet
 Is crimson in thy lips and in thy cheeks,
 And death’s pale flag is not advanced there. (*Romeo and Juliet*, V.iii.92-96)

lines that read as semi-religious (cf. “death hath no more dominion ouer him”; “Death is swallowed vp into victorie” Romans 6:9, 1 Corinthians 15:54, Geneva Bible [Anon. 1560]). Seneca gives us reason to take seriously such intimations: certainly the Stoic’s contempt for the material world in view of the eternal offers a more historically plausible model for the lovers’ attitude toward death than the Wagnerian *Liebestod* (let alone the Lacanian death wish) that has figured so largely in interpretations of the play since Denis de Rougemont’s *Love in the Western World*¹⁸.

Of course, precisely because Romeo and Juliet do not love the “lean abhorred monster”, and would prefer life together¹⁹, the lovers’

speare have found reading his reception of Senecan tragedy in view of Seneca’s philosophy instructive. See, for instance, Colin Burrow’s *Shakespeare and Classical Antiquity* (Burrow 2013, 177-86, 195-201).

17 Ramie Targoff argues that the lovers do not, and that Shakespeare denies such a consolation to the audience (Targoff 2012, 17-38).

18 *Liebestod*: “the ancient idea that death is in fact the true object of erotic desire” (Grady 2009, 202). See de Rougemont 1940, 164-66; Dollimore 2011, 108-13; Kristeva 1992, 296-315. See also, more recently, Kiernan Ryan: “The entire *Liebestod* in which the tragedy culminates is erotically charged to the point where the catastrophe can be construed as an apotheosis, a moment of sublime consummation [...]. But the familiarity of that romantic paradox [...] shouldn’t blind us to the craving for oblivion at its heart” (Ryan 2021, 52).

19 As Robin Wells writes in his argument against de Rougemont, Kristeva, and Dollimore, “while it’s true that the couple are certainly preoccupied with death, they seek it only as a desperate alternative to the prospect of life without their marriage partner [...]. Romeo [...] talks of death as a ‘love-devouring’ annihilator of all that matters to him [...] while Juliet sees it as a hopeless last resort” (Wells 2005, 113-14). See also Hugh Grady’s argument against this interpretive tradition: “*Romeo and Juliet* celebrates and cherishes desire as an essential life-force [and] mourns its

suicides remain wholly tragic, and death certainly seems to have the upper hand in the dateless bargain Romeo strikes with him. Nevertheless, more than their Stoic contempt for death, what makes the lovers' end Senecan is that horror has given way to wonder²⁰. Juliet fears that she will meet the cruel fate of Senecan personae, that she will go mad like Hercules or have her brains dashed out like Astyanax. Her premonitions that her "dismal scene" belongs to Senecan tragedy are accurate, but only insofar as there is more to Senecan tragedy than the horrifically grotesque. She does resemble Hercules in her death, but a Hercules restored to sanity; her death is Trojan, but only because she overthrows the darkness of the tomb with her light, and defies death with a final surge of vitality: not just the crimson warmth Romeo sees as she sleeps, but the flash of her wit ("O churl, drunk all, and left no friendly drop / To help me after?" [163-64]) – her willfulness and resolve, spoken in frank monosyllables: "Go, get thee hence, for I will not away / [...]. This is thy sheath; there rust and let me die" (160, 170).

Thus it is that *Romeo and Juliet* overpowers Senecan dread with Senecan wonder, reading the word against the word. Perhaps this is to say that, at brief but decisive moments, *Romeo and Juliet's* Senecanism exceeds even that of *Titus*, which only captures a fragmented half of the philosopher-tragedian's vision of the world. And perhaps this is also to revise G. K. Hunter's thesis that the two plays represent the extreme poles between which the future tragedies will fall, and to say that *Romeo and Juliet* itself embraces that tragic range, or at least adumbrates it, offering a vision of things to come.

loss in premature death [...]. *Romeo and Juliet* thus represents the defeat of death by desire crystallized in art at the same time that it recognizes and mourns both the cruelty of chance and the inevitability of death" (Grady 2009, 203-04).

20 For a richly beautiful reading of the lovers' deaths that focuses less on transcendence than the immanent presence of bodies and words, see Hester Lees-Jeffries: "At the very last there is still a sense of things fitting together beautifully, rightly, so that no other way would be imaginable: thoughts and voices; hands, kisses, bodies; a jointly crafted sonnet, couplet after couplet and shared verse lines; conceits of darkness and light tossed back and forth unerringly, joyfully. That is how *Romeo and Juliet* die, in each other's arms, together and *here*, and echoing each other's final words even in death" (Lees-Jeffries 2023, 253).

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“Like to the Pontic sea”: Early Modern Medea and the Dramatic Significance of *Othello* III.iii.456-61

Francesco Dall’Olio

This article offers a new take on a passage from the ‘seduction scene’ in *Othello* (III.iii.456-61), where scholarship has often recognized an imitation of a passage from Seneca’s *Medea* (404-7). It argues that this imitation has a deeper dramatic significance than previously recognized. It connects *Othello* to a well-established literary tradition founded on the perception of Medea in early modern English literature as a model of foreign, revengeful and powerful femininity. For this reason, her figure was, in Elizabethan prose and theatre, compared to or used as a model for the characterization either of rebellious female characters breaking societal norms to satisfy ‘unnatural’ desires, or for male characters suffering identity, social and/or gender, degradation. The passage in *Othello* apparently follows the same pattern. However, the context highlights a difference from this tradition, in so far as Othello is only an ambivalently integrated foreigner. The article shows how the imitation of Seneca’s *Medea* in the seduction scene fits into the dramatic and thematic patterns of *Othello*, contributing to the recent re-evaluation of continuities between this play and Senecan drama.

Keywords: *Othello*, *Medea*, Seneca, Otherness, Classical reception in early modern literature

Premise

The last three decades have seen an increasing amount of critical interest in the relationship between *Othello* and Senecan drama. Robert S. Miola has analysed its connections with Seneca’s Hercules tragedies (*Hercules furens* and *Hercules Oetaeus*) and the wider literary tradition around this mythical hero with regard to both the plot and Othello’s characterization as a wandering hero falling prey to *furor* (Miola 1992, 129-41). More recently, Curtis Perry has expanded on Miola’s analysis by interpreting the shift in Othello’s self-presentation from a Cicero-

nian model (where Othello's identity is founded on public acknowledgment of his valour) to a Senecan one (where his identity is based on his ability to stay unwaveringly true to his own idea of himself) as evidence of the decline of the republican values of Venice (Perry 2020, 240-42). Perry has also suggested a link between Atreus (the villain of Seneca's *Thyestes*) and Iago: both characters trigger the dramatic action, and both project a reflection of the darker sides of their own personalities onto their main victim, Thyestes and Othello, respectively (Perry 2020, 243-49). Such issues will be the object of my discussion in the following pages, which are concerned with a particular passage in *Othello*'s 'seduction scene' (III.iii.456-61). Studies of Senecanism in this play have pointed out that those lines may be read as a more or less direct imitation of a passage from Seneca's *Medea* (Braden 1985, 175-77; Miola 1992, 129; Cressler 2019, 87; Perry 2020, 241). However, not only the exact nature of this parallel, but also its dramatic function, have not been fully clarified. My intent is to explore the relevance of this Senecan echo in both *Othello*, III.iii and in the play as a whole. I shall start by offering an analysis of the Pontic-sea passage (as I will refer to it from now on), highlighting why, in my opinion, Shakespeare is not only directly imitating the lines from Seneca's *Medea* singled out by Braden, but also building upon its original meaning. I will then show how the passage is part of an established poetic and literary tradition focused on the character of Medea which can be traced in texts of English Renaissance prose and theatre¹. In those texts, Medea was a model for the characterization of either rebellious and violent female characters, or of male characters who were losing their social or gender identity. By setting the Pontic-sea passage against this tradition, I will weigh its position within this imaginary and contend that a comparison with that Elizabethan tradition shows its intrinsic relevance to the play as a whole. As will be seen, Shakespeare's use of the Medea model fits in well within the dramatic structure of *Othello*. Its full significance emerges once we take into account the peculiar status of Othello as a foreigner only apparently integrated within the Venetian society and Medea as a foreigner rebelling against the established order.

¹ Surprisingly enough, this is a connection that, to my knowledge, has never been explored, although all major studies on the subject have acknowledged the reference to *Medea* in the Pontic-sea passage.

1. The 'Pontic' passage

At the end of the 'seduction scene', Othello is already convinced of Desdemona's guilt and is determined to take revenge. Iago, feigning care, tries to calm him down by suggesting that he may still want to change his mind. Othello indignantly replies²:

OTHELLO
 Never, Iago. Like to the Pontic sea
 Whose icy currents and compulsive course
 Ne'er keeps retiring ebb but keeps due on
 To the Propontic and the Hellespont:
 Even so my bloody thoughts with violent pace
 Shall ne'er look back.
 (*Othello*, III.iii.456-61)

This passage was singled out by Gordon Braden as an example of the "general wash of sentiments and topoi that can be called Senecan" (Braden 1985, 175) in English Renaissance theatre, suggesting the influence of a passage from the Latin text of Seneca's *Medea*³:

MEDEA
 dum siccas polus
 versabit Arctos, flumina in pontum cadent,
 numquam meus cessabit in poenas furor.
 (*Sen. Med.*, 404-7)

(Until the pole will keep the dry Bears spinning, and the rivers will flow into the sea, my fury will never cease to think of punishments for them.)

MEDEA
 While flushing floudes the frothy streames to rustling Seas doe send,
 To gird them gript with plonging pangues my rage shall neuer end.
 (*Seneca* 1581, 128r)

2 All quotations from *Othello* are from Shakespeare 2016.

3 Braden quotes a longer textual portion, comprising all the lines from 404 to 414. It is my opinion, however, that the mythological and geographical examples presented at ll. 407-11 are not relevant to the comparison. I quote the original Latin text from Seneca 2018; as for the English translation, I will mainly refer to John Studley's Renaissance translation (see below), except for when a more literal translation is needed, which will be my own.

Braden's analysis did not go further, and later studies have been divided on how to consider the relation between the two passages. Some, like Loren Cressler, have confidently recognized here a reprisal of "several *topoi* [...] directly from Seneca's *Medea*" (Cressler 2019, 87). Others, like Perry, while acknowledging that the passage does constitute "a signal moment of Senecan self-declaration" (Perry 2020, 241), follow Braden in seeing here only "a possible verbal echo" of *Medea*. Braden and Perry's doubts have a solid foundation: the passage from *Othello* is not a word-for-word quotation of the Latin text. And yet, it is my opinion that there are enough formal elements to allow us to see an allusion to the rhetorical *topos* present in those lines from Seneca's *Medea*.

As Braden himself noted, the two passages are connected to a similar psychological pattern: "like Medea, Othello is rousing himself to an ideal of murderous constancy by annexing his own resolve to the power of vast and distant natural forces" (Braden 1985, 176). It should also be added that, in both plays, this dramatic outburst represents a violent reaction to an event that, for the characters, represents the final straw in their (real or perceived) misfortune. Medea, after being abandoned by Jason, is banished by Creon; Othello is eventually persuaded of the truth of Iago's lies and believes in Desdemona's betrayal. Both characters vow revenge, and when confronted with attempts to assuage their fury (the Nutrix and Iago, respectively) both confirm their unstinting determination. The two passages also display similar rhetorical structures: they first bring an example of Nature's potency and then express the speakers' resolution never to cease pursuing their revenge. They also use the same image of a course of water – "flumina" (rivers) in *Medea*, the "icy currents" of Pontus in *Othello* – flowing into a larger body – the "pontum" (sea) and the Hellespont – as part of an unchangeable order of things. This description allows them to utter their vengeful intent (called "furor" in *Medea* and "bloody thoughts" in *Othello*) in equally unchangeable and solid terms: they will not stop until they achieve their goal. Shakespeare proposes a lengthy geographical description of the Pontus' currents which is more elaborate than the simpler Senecan reference to a much more common phenomenon as the rivers flowing towards the sea. However, this kind of expansion was typical of Elizabethan translations of Seneca (as will be seen in John Studley's *Medea*). Since this

passage, as everybody agrees, displays a style reminiscent of those translations, it does not seem far-fetched to assume that what Shakespeare is providing here is his own expansion and rewriting of that Senecan passage to suit it to the character of Othello, while retaining something of the Senecan meaning.

In particular, the reference to a distant natural phenomenon echoes the account of Othello's own travels that, in Act 1, he says he recounted to Desdemona: "antres vast and deserts idle, / Rough quarries, rocks and hills whose heads touch heaven [...] / the cannibals that each other eat, / The Antropophagi, and men whose heads / Do grow beneath their shoulder" (I.iii.141-42, 143-44). Especially interesting is the mention of the Antropophagi. According to Ayanna Thompson (Shakespeare 2018, 15-17), Shakespeare found the word in Pliny the Elder's *Naturalis historia* (whose English translation by Philemon Holland appeared in 1601), where it was used to refer to some Scythian tribe. From the same work, he also derived the description of the currents of the "Pontic sea" (Braden 1985, 174; Thompson in Shakespeare 2016, 15-17; Perry 2020, 241). Roughly corresponding to present-day Black Sea, it was often related to Scythia by a long-standing geographical and literary tradition dating back to antiquity (including Seneca; see below). Those two geographical references form a significant dramatic connection. Back in Act 1, we understand that it was by telling Desdemona about his travels that Othello first won her love (168, "She loved me for the dangers I passed"), and then convinced the Senate of Venice to look favourably upon their marriage (170, "I think this tale would win my daughter too", says the Duke). Both Desdemona's love and the Senate's acceptance of their union were interpreted by Othello as a mark of his acceptance in Venetian society and a public acknowledgment of his own status as a heroic general. But now that he thinks he has lost Desdemona's love, Othello seems to feel that he has also lost his status as a civilized hero. "Othello's occupation's gone", he had previously said in that same scene (*Oth.*, III.iii.360) at the end of a long passage where he equated the loss of Desdemona's love to that of "his very [...] identity in European civilisation" (Serpieri 2003, 122)⁴ as a general of the Republic of Venice. His decision to pursue revenge upon Desdemona can thus be

4 All translations from Serpieri 2003 are mine.

read as a way to construct a new heroic identity, which does not need social validation (Perry 2020, 241-42). The two geographical references to the area of Black Sea derived from Pliny thus serve as a poetical and dramatic leitmotiv, marking the climax of Othello's happiness as well as the beginning of his misfortune.

However, the same geographical references also constitute another link between Othello and Medea. In another long-standing tradition dating back to antiquity, the mythical Colchis from which Medea comes is located in that area (see Braund 1994, 8-39). Medea herself, in Seneca's play, refers to "Pontus [...] Scythicus" (Sen. *Med.*, 213-14) as she describes her motherland. This is the second occurrence of the term 'Pontus' in Seneca's tragedy, following Medea's initial soliloquy (*Med.*, 44-45), where she voiced her resolve to be true to herself: "Quodcumque vidit Pontus aut Phasis nefas, / videbit Ishtmos" ("Whatever crime Pontus or Phasis saw, the Isthmus shall see")⁵. The *nefas* to which Medea alludes here is the murder of her brother Absyrtus, whom she cut to pieces to delay her father's pursuit of the fleeing Argonauts. The allusion establishes a comparison between Medea's past situation and her present one: as she was then ready to kill her brother for Jason's love with no hesitation, so now she is ready to commit any cruelties to punish him for abandoning her. It is a psychological process similar to the one we have just seen in Othello. As he promises to be as heroic in dealing with Desdemona's betrayal as he was in his military exploits, so Medea promises to be as cruel in her revenge as she was in her love. It is also worth noticing that in either case they refer to different bodies of water connected to Colchis (Pontus and the river Phasis) and Corinth (the Isthmus). This anticipates Medea's later comparison of her murderous resolution with the flowing of rivers in the passage Shakespeare seems to be reminiscent of as a model for the Pontic passage.

Pontus is also mentioned by Medea a third time, during her confrontation with Jason. This is an interesting moment because it comes shortly after the passage identified by Braden, and because Medea connects the "Pontici fauces freti" to the Simplegades. The Argonauts' success in passing those two mythical moving rocks was the most famous feat of their expedition:

5 I here provide my own translation, since Studley omits the reference to Pontus and only keeps that to Phasis.

MEDEA

Pontici fauces freti
per quas revexi nobilem regum manum
adulterum secuta per Symplegades.
(Sen. *Med.*, 454-56)

The parlous hatefull iawes of Pontus [...]
By which I did saufe conduct home kings valiaunt armies great,
Where roaring rocks with thundring noise the flapping waues do beate
Or on the narrow wrackfull shore, of Simplegades twayne.
(Seneca 1581, 1297)

The journey back from Colchis to Greece described by Medea follows the same route as the current of Pontus in *Othello* (and Studley's longer description of the Simplegades may be compared to Shakespeare's description of Pontus' tides). And if in Seneca the reference highlights that Medea's plight has no solution (now that Jason has abandoned her, she cannot return home), in Shakespeare *Othello* uses the image to express the irrevocability of his decision (now that he is resolved, nothing will change his mind). In both plays, the mythical passage from Pontus to Hellespont is evoked as the symbol of a (literal or metaphorical) journey from which there is no return.

We may then conclude that the Pontic-sea passage in *Othello* presents enough formal and dramatic connections with the one in Seneca's *Medea* singled out by Braden to be considered more than a possibly vague memory as Braden suggested. It can also be argued that Shakespeare in fact builds upon Medea's lines for specific dramatic purposes. Like the mythical figure of the Colchian sorceress, through a comparison between his own revengeful resolution and the natural phenomenon of a body of water flowing into a larger one, Othello too expresses not only his own desire to get compensation for his betrayed love, but also his resolution to reinstate his own identity, which he feels threatened and besmirched by an unfaithful lover. In this sense, the Pontic passage falls within the scope of a broader Elizabethan tradition of appropriations of the Medea model which articulate the violent or cruel vengeful behaviour of male or female tragic characters, or their loss of social or gender identity. To a discussion of this tradition I will turn now.

2. *Medea in English Renaissance*

There are good reasons for considering John Studley's translation of Seneca's *Medea* (first published in 1566, and then reprinted in the general edition of Seneca's tragic corpus edited by Thomas Newton in 1581) as the starting point for the Elizabethan literary reception of Medea. Although it was neither the first time she appeared in early modern English literature⁶, nor was it the only ancient text recounting her story available to Elizabethan readers⁷, Studley's translation represented the most detailed and complete literary version of the ancient myth during the English Renaissance⁸. The Medea portrait Studley offered constitutes what the Elizabethans very likely knew about her; it was mainly from this text that they derived their sense of the Colchian sorceress.

Studley modified Seneca's text significantly with a view to drawing a sympathetic portrayal of Medea as a woman seduced and forsaken, as the first lines of his Argument suggest: "Care sore did grype Medeas heart to see / Her Iason, whom shee tendred

6 As one of the main protagonists in the classical myth of the Argonauts, Medea featured in all the major retellings of the myth in Medieval English literature, from Geoffrey Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women* (ll. 1598-1678; date unknown), to John Gower's *Confessio Amantis* (5.3247-4229; 1387-1390), to John Lydgate's *Troy Book* and William Caxton's *History of Jason* (on which see below). This is only part of the much wider fortune of the character in European Medieval literature, on which see Morse 1996; McElduff 2012; Heavey 2015, 22-47.

7 Medea also featured in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (7.1-401), *Heroides* (Letter 12) and *Tristia* (3.9), all translated into English when Seneca's tragedy was also being translated (the first two in 1567 by Arthur Golding and George Turberville respectively, the latter in 1572 by Thomas Churchyard). On this see Lyne 2001, 72-73; Lyne 2004; Oakley-Brown 2011; Heavey 2015, 63-84. As for Euripides' *Medea*, the knowledge of this work in Elizabethan times is difficult to demonstrate. The *PLRE* archive does not present any edition of this play in any private library in England (unlike other tragedies, such as *Hecuba*), and no evidence of the influence of this tragedy has ever been suggested on any Elizabethan text (with the exception of Sidney's *Antonius*; see below, n17).

8 No rewriting of Medea's story may be found in English literature until Charles Johnson's *The Tragedy of Medea* (1730). Although Ovid exerted an influence over Medieval authors (see Galloway 2013; Heavey 2015, 32, 36-38), his texts never offer a full account of Medea's revenge, nor do they provide a profile of Medea that could offer an alternative model to Seneca.

with her lyfe, / [...] Renouncing her" (Seneca 1581⁹, 119r). For the same reason, he completely rewrote the first Chorus in order to emphasize her pain. In the Latin original, this is a wedding song for Jason and his new bride, where the Chorus rejoices at the hero freeing himself from Medea's clutches for a more suitable and happier marriage (Sen. *Med.*, 102-06; Biondi 1984, 29-30). Studley's new piece has the Chorus express pity for her having been deceived by "false Iason" (Seneca 1581, 121r)¹⁰. Medea committed crimes for Jason's love, from the aforementioned murder of her brother Absyrtus, to that of Pelias, Jason's uncle, who was usurping his throne. Studley turned her original mention of such actions into an appreciation of her "good turns" or "good deeds" for Jason, with a clear sense of her goodwill towards him. In other words, her original acknowledgement of Jason's responsibility in her atrocities, which she does not hesitate to call *scelera* (crimes) in the Latin original (*Med.*, 236-45, 465-76), is rephrased by Studley to foreground her commitment to being good to her lover. As a result, Studley's Medea emerges as a weaker character than in Seneca: the stress the translator puts on her suffering as a woman in love highlights how dependent she is on Jason and how much of a victim she is.

At the same time, Studley also "plays up the horror and the gore that Seneca's play suggests" (Heavey 2015, 53). While Seneca's text only alludes to the murders committed by Medea, Studley provides a full account of those crimes, emphasizing their bloodiest aspects. Studley also anticipates Medea's decision to kill her children at the play's outset, describing the murder in chilling terms: "at the Aulters of the God my children shalbe slayne, / With

9 I refer to the 1581 general edition of Seneca's corpus in English, not only as a second and 'definitive' version of the text, but also as the version more likely known to Shakespeare.

10 For a discussion of this kind of change in Senecan translations, see Kieffer 1978; Winston 2006, 47-53; Bigliuzzi 2021. Studley is here strangely similar to Euripides, whose *Medea* has a Chorus sympathetic with the titular character. Euripides' tragedy had been translated into Latin for the first time by George Buchanan in 1543-1544, and had enjoyed some success (see Dall'Olio 2021, 124-29). However, there is no conclusive evidence that it was known in England by the time of Studley's translation; and, since the view of Medea as a victim of Jason was already present in some authors of late Medieval English literature, an influence of Euripides on this particular point is hardly arguable.

crimsen colourde bloud of Babes their Aulters will I stayne" (120v). Moreover, Studley expands on Seneca's descriptions of Medea's fury whenever he can, offering a more graphic depiction of her emotional turmoil:

NUTRIX

Non facile secum versat aut medium scelus;
se vincet: irae novimus veteris notas.
Magnum aliquid instat, efferum immane impium:
vultum furoris cerno.
(Sen. *Med.*, 393-96)

(It is not a normal crime that she meditates to herself: she will surpass herself. I know the signs of ancient anger. There is something looming that is fierce, immense, ungodly. I see rage in her face.) (My translation)

NUTRIX

Enkindled fury new in breast begins to boyle a mayne.
Shee secretly entendes no mischiefe small nor meane of life
To passe her selfe in wickednes her busy braynes deuise.
The token olde of pinching ire full well ere this know I:
Some haynous, huge, outrageous great, and dredfull storme is nye:
Her firy, scowling, steaming Eyes, her hanging Groyne I see,
Her powling, puffed, frowning Face, that signes of freatting bee.
(Seneca 1581, 128r)

These expansions and additions provide a more intimidating picture of Medea's rage than in the original Latin text, balancing and completing Medea's portrayal by unveiling a close link between her desire for revenge and her passion for Jason.

Medea thus emerges as a violent, deranged woman, unable to restrain her passions and capable of committing any crime to satisfy her desires. From this point of view, Studley's translation carries over traits that can be found in 15th-century depictions in such works as John Lydgate's *Troy Book* (1.1513-3720, 1420) and William Caxton's *History of Jason* (1477). In those texts, Medea was described as "a troublesome incarnation of female desire and disobedience" (Heavey 2015, 42), a negative example of a rebellious woman bent on doing anything to satisfy her desires beyond social conventions. As such, she was also explicitly condemned as a wicked woman, whose example women should avoid to follow. While Studley's translation does not

fully commit to this view¹¹, his interventions on Seneca's text do offer a depiction of Medea as a duplicitous female figure, whose tendency to recklessly abandon herself to her own overbearing passions leads her to commit terrible crimes out of either love or hate. In this sense, the early modern negative reading of Medea is not only retained, but even emphasized here, in so far as it provides the literary lenses through which Studley interprets and rewrites Seneca's text. It is in this light that Studley's faithful rendition of a few peculiar aspects of Seneca's Medea should be read. They were not present before, but they will prove fundamental to the subsequent reprisals of this figure in the Elizabethan period.

First, her wise side. In Seneca's tragedy, Medea is engaged in self-analysis: she wants to be what she thinks she is, and this involves her unwavering commitment to revenge¹². This process, as noted by Shadi Bartsch, "echoes with many of the themes of the self-shaping of the Stoic student" (Bartsch 2006, 272; see also 255-81), thus turning Medea into a sort of evil counterpart of this ideal (a "monster-sage", 277)¹³. Studley's translation reproduces this psychological progress, as can be noticed in the first dialogue between Medea and the Nutrix. In Seneca, Medea's answer to the Nutrix's invitations to bear her plight without complaint is reminiscent of some crucial points of Stoic morality: "Numquam potest non esse virtuti locus" (*Med.*, 161; "It is not possible that there is not a place for virtue"; my translation), "Fortuna opes auferre, non animum potest" (176; "Fortune may take away riches, but not valour"). Studley's translation does not preserve the Stoic undertones but keeps the wise content of those lines: "The show of sturdy valiant heart, at any time doth shyne"; "Full well may fortunes welting wheele

11 On the contrary, his stress on Medea's plight as a victim of Jason can also be seen as an influence of the defenceless, helpless victim of Jason's seduction typical of the Medieval Medea. This was how Medea was represented by 14th-century writers such as Geoffrey Chaucer and John Gower (see above, n5): cf. Heavey 2015, 53-55.

12 "Medea nunc sum" (*Med.*, 910; "Medea am I made"), she says after being informed of the death of her first victims and before going on to kill her children. Her line here echoes her previous reply to the Nutrix (171; "Nu. Medea – "M. Fiam"; "Nu. Medea – M. I will be"; my translation).

13 This depiction of the villain as a 'perversion' of the wise man is typical of Senecan theatre: cf. Biondi in Seneca 2018, 47-48.

to begging bring my state, / As for my worthy corage, that shee, neuer shall abate" (Seneca 1581, 124). This virtuous aspect is soon confirmed in Medea's subsequent confrontation with Creon, King of Corinth and Jason's new father-in-law, as he comes to sentence her to exile. Once again, Studley plays up elements already present in Seneca's drama: Creon, described as "puft up with pouncing pryde" (123*v*; "tumidus imperio", *Med.*, 178), refuses Medea's request for a fair hearing of her case and insists that she goes into exile, "b'it either right or wrong" (124*r*; "aequum atque iniquum", 195). Such behaviour qualifies Creon as an unjust sovereign using his power to affirm his own interests as a tyrant, while at the same time bestowing upon Medea the honourable status of a subject resisting tyranny (Woodbridge 2010, 136-37)¹⁴. This emphasis on Medea's virtuous ability to remain strong in the face of adversities is another demonstration of her unwavering commitment to carry out her designs: she is as admirable in her decision not to bow to tyranny as she is monstrous in her resolution to kill her own children.

Another important feature of Seneca's Medea Studley also faithfully preserves is her foreignness. As Giuseppe Gilberto Biondi has pointed out (Biondi 1984, 49-53), Seneca presents the tragedy of Medea as consequent to the *nefas* (impiety) committed by the Argonauts, the first men to build a ship and voyage across the sea. Their enterprise plunged the world into chaos:

CHORUS

Quaelibet altum cumba pererrat;
terminus omnis motus et urbes
muros terra posuere nova,
nil qua fuerat sede reliquit
pervius orbis.
(*Med.*, 369-72)

CHORUS

All stynts and warres are taken cleane away,
The Cities frame new walles themselues to keepe,
The open worlde lettes nought rest where it lay.
(Seneca 1581, 127*r*)

¹⁴ This is part of a larger trend in Elizabethan translations of Seneca, where similar scenes are rewritten by the different translators to exalt resistance against tyranny: see Woodbridge 2010, 130-38.

The Argonauts themselves have all met unfortunate deaths, which the Chorus sees as a proof of the punishment they received from the gods for breaking the “sancta / foedera mundi” (132r, “the frame / Of heauen” that “Ioue with sacred hand hath halowed”). Medea’s marriage to Jason represents in this view a consequence of the unnatural chaos brought about by the expedition. In addition, Medea’s revenge in Seneca underlines her barbarism. Not only does Medea’s performance of the richly detailed rite to enchant the tunic which will kill Creusa occupy an entire scene, but Medea herself will also interpret her revenge as a recovery of her original barbaric identity:

MEDEA

Iam iam recepi scepra germanum patrem,

[...]

rediere regna, rapta virginitas redit.

(*Med.*, 982, 984)

MEDEA

Now, now my Scepter guilt I haue recouered once agayne:

My Fathers wronges reuenged are, and eke my brother slayne:

[...]

Possession of my realme I haue reclaimed to my hand;

Come home is my virginity, that whilom went astray.

(Seneca 1581, 139r)

As testified by these examples, Studley’s translation reproduces this particular aspect of Seneca’s tragedy, foregrounding another layer of Medea’s psychology: besides being a rebellious woman, she is also a foreigner who holds arcane knowledge.

To sum up: Studley’s translation retains the interpretative framework typical of early modern English receptions, which viewed Medea as a negative example of femininity. However, it adds new facets to it by retaining her typically Senecan foreignness and ability to lucidly and entirely commit herself to her designs. In doing so, Studley sets the tone for Medea’s subsequent rearticulations in Elizabethan poetry, prose, and drama, which by and large will follow his interpretation of Seneca. We can already see this in two texts from the 1560s and 1570s, where Medea is referred to as a term of comparison for rebellious, violent female figures: Pandora, the protagonist of the third story in Geoffrey Fenton’s anthology *Certaine*

Tragicall Discourses (1567), and Violenta, the female lead in Thomas Achelley's poem *Tragicall Historie of Didaco and Violenta* (1576). Both characters are explicitly compared to Medea as strong-willed women who enter into socially unsuitable marriages only to take revenge upon their partners when they are abandoned¹⁵. Like her, they are highly passionate female figures nurturing unbecoming desires and taking measures to satisfy them, with no hesitation or regard for any rules. Like her, they are described as strong-willed women, capable of committing to their own decisions with unshakable firmness. Their foreignness is also a key trait: being Italian and Spanish, respectively, and therefore Catholic, their 'unnatural' personalities are also presented as dependent on the corruption of their countries (Heavey 2015, 89-92, 97-98). In a word, both characters are modern versions of the literary paradigm embodied by Seneca's Medea in Studley's translation, which makes it all the more relevant that, unlike her, Pandora and Violenta are punished shortly after achieving their revenge. Such endings allow Fenton and Achelley to present their stories as cautionary tales for women, so that they conform to social rules and prove good examples of womanhood.

Fenton and Achelley's narratives – the former in prose, the latter in verse – represent the first instances of what would become an established pattern in Elizabethan literature about the use of Medea as a model for negative female figures pursuing either unnatural or criminal desires, eventually only to atone for their actions¹⁶. Elizabethan tragic theatre teems with such examples, from Atossa, the antagonist in William Alabaster's Latin tragedy *Roxana* (1592-1595, printed 1632), to Guendoline, the antagonist in the anonymous tragedy *Lochrine* (1594, printed 1595). Both characters are presented as bent on taking revenge on a partner who has deserted them, as well as on his new lover, revelling in their anticipation of committing terrible crimes, only to fail to emerge victorious (Atossa), or to be pre-

15 Violenta kills her partner only, while Pandora also kills their children. It should be noted that Medea's primary role in Elizabethan literature is *not* as an infanticide.

16 The same pattern is applied directly to Medea in two poems, Richard Robinson's *The Rewarde of Wickednesse* (1574) and George Whetstone's *The Rocke of Regard* (1576), where Medea herself is shown as being punished in the afterlife for her crimes: see Heavey 2015, 92-93.

vented from carrying out their revenge (Guendoline; cf. Heavey 2015, 98-105). However, the most glaring example of this type of character is arguably Tamora from Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* (printed in 1594). Like the other female characters just mentioned, Tamora is a woman capable of strong passions, ready to do anything (including unspeakable crimes) in order to attain the object of her desire. She is a powerful foreign woman whose coming to Rome symbolizes an unnatural mixture of different people brought about by the political expansion of the city (Grogan 2013). At the end of the tragedy, Tamora falls victim to Titus' revenge, thus suffering the same fate as the other Medea-like female figures. Years later, Shakespeare would present another female character who has often been compared to Medea, albeit with major differences: Lady Macbeth (see Miola 1992, 106-7; Ewbank 2007; Clark and Mason in Shakespeare 2015, 90-92; Heavey 2015, 105-13). Unlike characters such as Tamora, Lady Macbeth is not a foreigner, nor does she pursue any vengeful plots. And yet, verbal echoes of Seneca's *Medea* in her invocation to the spirits of the night (*Mac.*, I.v.40-54) have suggested similarities with Medea's nocturnal side as a sorceress (Ewbank 2007, 83-85). Her subsequent driving force behind Duncan's murder also recalls the ability of Seneca's Medea to devise and project crimes in her attempt to get the object of her desire. Like other Medea-like figures in Elizabethan literature, finally, she does not enjoy the outcomes of her wilful agency but is driven insane by it.

However, Medea is not exclusively connected with female characters, as there are examples of male figures in Elizabethan tragedy who are also linked to her. In such cases, their experience of identity debasement goes through stages where they are likened to qualities associated with Medea, as in the case of Young Clifford in Shakespeare's *Henry VI Part 2* (printed 1594). In front of his father's body, Clifford promises to avenge him and compares his future exploits against the York family to Medea's murder of her brother Absyrtus (V.iii.57-59). In the context of civil war, Clifford's evocation of Medea's fury highlights the worsening of the conflict, whose violent escalation leads men to abandon and desert every social bond and commit themselves to a cycle of ever-growing violence (Heavey 2016). Clifford will hold true to this world by contributing to the murder of York and his son Rutland, only to die in battle shortly afterward.

Though brief, his tenure on stage perfectly exemplifies the path of the Medea-like male figure of Elizabethan tragedy, which will also be featured in other Elizabethan tragedies – albeit with some considerable differences. In Mary Sidney's closet drama *Antonius* (1592), Medea represents a model for the characterization not only (and not surprisingly) of Cleopatra as a barbarian and powerful woman, but also of Antonius as a “figure of abandonment and despair” (Zanoni 2021, 130)¹⁷. A decade later, around the time *Othello* was first staged¹⁸, Andrugio in John Marston's *Antonio and Mellida* (printed in 1602) commits to bear the strikes of Fortune with the same words addressed by Medea to the Nutrix:

ANDRUGIO
 There's nothing left
 Unto Andrugio, but Andrugio;
 And that nor mischief, force, distress nor hell can take.
 (Iii.i.59-61)¹⁹

As these examples show, when it comes to male characters, other qualities of Medea than her revengeful fury are evoked. However, the pattern does not change significantly. As a victim of Cleopatra's seduction, Antonius is a man who has lost both his national identity as a Roman and his gender identity as a man (Zanoni 2021, 130-31). As for Andrugio, not only is the aforementioned passage uttered in a context where he has been excluded from every social bond, but his effort will be revealed as vain in Marston's sequel play, *Antonio's Revenge* (printed 1602), where the audience is informed that Andrugio has fallen victim to his enemy, Piero²⁰. For those characters as well as

17 Zanoni argues for Mary Sidney's possible knowledge of Euripides' *Medea*, either in Greek or in Latin (Zanoni 2021, 128-30). However, Zanoni herself acknowledges that this possible Euripidean influence is part of a net of mythical and literary references, of which Seneca in Studley's translation is also a part (132-33). Personally, I would also note that, in this case, Euripides' supposed influence does not seem to bring any substantial changes to the well-established pattern underlying Medea's presence in Elizabethan literature.

18 I follow Honigmann in seeing *Othello* as first performed around mid-1602: see Honigmann in Shakespeare 2016, 349-56.

19 I quote from Marston 1964.

20 In *Antonio and Mellida*, Andrugio, Duke of Genoa, is considered either dead

for Clifford, references to Medea illustrate an irreparable falling off of the male character from his social identity.

The Pontic-sea passage in *Othello* can be seen as another instance of this tradition of Medea-like male characters who have lost their social identity. The dramatic context in which the passage is uttered does indeed fit. Like Clifford, Othello is vowing revenge for a betrayal; in doing so, Othello is assuming for himself Medea's constancy against the blows of Fortune, like Andrugio. If Clifford and Andrugio have both lost their social identities (either by choice or by Fortune), Othello too, as already seen, feels as if he had. His subsequent decision to be resolute and firm in his punishment of Desdemona, as a way to recover his own heroic self, is a psychological process similar to that of Andrugio, who in Marston's tragedy tries to fight against Fortune by trying to conform to a model of heroic firmness after losing all he had – and in both *Othello* and *Antonio and Mellida* this decision is highlighted by a textual allusion to Seneca's *Medea*. Finally, as for Clifford and Andrugio, for Othello too this narrative pattern will end in tragedy: he will achieve his revenge, but he will then discover that it was carried out for nought, and consequently will commit suicide.

We may then conclude that the narrative and poetic pattern involving Medea in connection with male characters seems to be central to *Othello* as a play, and that Othello can be considered yet another example of a Medea-like male character typical of Elizabethan theatre; a character whose loss of social identity and seemingly heroic resolution to fight against his plight by exacting revenge on those who wronged him foretells a tragic destiny. However, the circumstance of the 'seduction scene', and more generally of *Othello* as a whole, gives an altogether new meaning to the Medea allusion

or missing after a battle, and he is forced to disguise himself to avoid the persecution of his mortal enemy, Piero Sforza, Duke of Venice. At the same time, his son Antonio is in love with Mellida, Piero's daughter, and tries to woo her by infiltrating in Piero's court under a false name. At the end of the play, Antonio manages to persuade Piero to approve his marriage with Mellida and make peace with Andrugio. This happy ending will be revealed as false at the beginning of *Antonio's Revenge*, where Piero, in his opening soliloquy, informs the audience that he poisoned Andrugio. The rest of the play will see Antonio trying to get revenge over Piero for his father's death.

and the Medea narrative pattern here evoked; one that goes beyond the well-established poetic tradition contemporary to Shakespeare's play, and instead points to a more complex relationship between *Othello* and the Elizabethan imagery connected with Medea. To an exploration of this relationship I will now turn in the third and final part of this article.

3. *Medea and Othello*

When I suggested that Othello feels that he has lost his social identity, I meant to point out an important difference from the examples of other Medea-like male characters such as Clifford and Andrugio. In their cases, the loss of identity was real, due to objective, external circumstances. In *Othello*, instead, the audience knows that Desdemona's betrayal is Iago's invention, and that Othello has no actual reason to play the role of the betrayed man and plot for revenge against his spouse. In this sense, Miola was right in remarking that the Pontic-sea passage with the evocation of Medea highlights the success of Iago's plan by "proclaim[ing] [...] that [Othello] has assumed the role Iago casts him in, that of a Senecan avenger" (Miola 1992, 129)²¹. Nevertheless, this is not the only effect of the Senecan parallel. The evocation of Medea and of the literary tradition connected with her are directly relevant to the way Shakespeare deals with the cultural construction of a dangerous Other in *Othello*. I would even argue that three different meanings may be traced in this passage, each one related to one of the main characters of the play (Othello, Iago and Desdemona) as well as to the Elizabethan Medea model circulating at the time.

Let us start with Othello. We saw that, in his words, the evocation of Medea expresses his sense of loss of his social identity as a member of European civilisation. Nonetheless, the action of the play makes it clear that such an identity had always been an issue. As Janet Adelman remarked, the first description the audience hears of Othello is

²¹ Loren Cressler offers another interpretation of this passage as "signalling the beginning of a revenge plot taking roots" (Cressler 2019, 87). I find this persuasive, given not only that the following events of the play will stage Othello's revenge on Desdemona, but also the well-known influence of Senecan tragedies on such works.

from Iago and Roderigo as they go to tell Brabantio about the Moor and Desdemona's secret marriage (Adelman 1997, 125-26). The image they evoke – a “lascivious Moor” (I.i.125), “an old black ram / Tupping [a] white ewe” (87-88) – is a very familiar one to the Elizabethan audience: the lustful black stranger, corruptor, and ravisher of women (Vitkus 2003, 91-92). Only the appearance of Othello on stage in the next scene will disperse this image, thus making the audience aware of the difference between what Iago and Roderigo presented as being true, and Othello's actual character as a noble and heroic general²². The rest of the action in Act 1 will continue to harp on this contradiction through Brabantio's attempt at having Othello punished for bewitching his daughter into marrying him – which Brabantio defines as a threat to Venice's identity²³:

BRABANTIO

[...] The duke himself,

Or any of my brothers of the state,
 Cannot but feel this wrong as 'twere their own.
 For if such actions may have passage free
 Bond-slaves and pagans shall our statesmen be.
 (*Othello*, I.ii.99-102)

22 Much has been written about what a shock it would have been for an Elizabethan audience to see a black man integrated into European civilisation at its highest levels. Those studies were usually based on the assumption that the majority of black people present in Tudor England – which had become reasonably substantial by the end of the sixteenth century: cf. Serpieri 2003, 25, 222 – would consist of slaves, or at least low-rank citizens. Recent studies, such as Miranda Kaufman 2017, have questioned such a view, by pointing out instead at the presence in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England of some notable examples of black men successfully integrated into English society, some even in high social places. Admittedly, this does suggest that Othello's character might not have been as shocking to Elizabethan audiences as has been thought.

23 Brabantio's fear is heightened by the fact that Venice in *Othello* is tellingly represented as a city “shot through with foreignness” (Perry 2020, 238), home to a highly heterogeneous group of characters whose foreign origin is either declared (Othello, the Moor, Cassio the Florentine) or implied (Iago and Roderigo carry Spanish names, even though they are presented as native to Venice). For a more detailed analysis of the place of Venice in Shakespeare's imagination, I refer to Laura Tosi and Shaul Bassi 2011.

As Daniel Vitkus showed, Brabantio “presents a clear analogy between Othello’s [...] theft of Desdemona and the Turks’ [...] attempt to steal Cyprus” (Vitkus 2003, 92). He describes Othello as a threatening stranger who used “drugs [...] charms [...] conjuration and [...] mighty magic” (*Oth.*, I.iii.92-93) to ensnare his daughter into an unnatural union. Even if he fails, his action still shows that Othello’s confidence that his services to the State have granted him acceptance (I.ii.18-19, “My services, which I have done the signiory, / Shall out-tongue his [Brabantio’s] complaints”) is not as well-founded as he thinks: as a Moor converted to Christianity, Othello still elicits suspicions whether he truly has become a proper member of society. And indeed, the moment Iago convinces him of Desdemona’s unfaithfulness, Othello immediately resumes his original barbarian identity. In his study of the play as a “drama of conversion” (Vitkus 2003, 77), Vitkus shows how Othello’s reaction to Iago’s lies recalls, on the one hand, the description of the Moors contained in geographical treatises such as *De la description dell’Africa* by Leo Africanus (published in an English translation by John Pory in 1600) as “honest and trusting but jealous and given to passionate, vengeful rage when wronged” (91); and, on the other, the well-known dramatic type of “the Islamic tyrant [...] who rules by will and appetite, committing rash acts of cruelty” (99). By the end of the play, Othello himself will view his murder of Desdemona as a relapse into his identity as a barbarian. As he prepares to commit suicide, Othello tells a story about how he punished “a malignant and a turbaned Turk” who “beat a Venetian and traduced the state” (*Othello*, V.ii.351-52). In this tale, as Serpieri remarks, Othello splits himself into two different roles, so that “his acculturated ego kill[s] and punishe[s] his barbarian ego” (Serpieri 2003, 194). Iago’s deception has transformed Othello into the threatening Other Iago, Roderigo and Brabantio saw him as at the beginning of the play²⁴.

24 Othello’s Otherness as a black man has been the subject of much critical discussion, as well as public outrage. Famous is Coleridge’s denial of Othello’s negritude, as is the censorship of Victorian performances of the play, where the final sight of Othello and Desdemona’s bodies was concealed from the audience (see Neill 1989). The theme has become relevant once again in the second half of the twentieth century, in the context of the struggle for civil rights. Notably, black actors have expressed different attitudes towards Othello’s character, sometime

As we noticed in the previous section, foreignness was a recurring theme in Elizabethan interpretations of Medea, as well as a prominent one in Seneca's tragedy. An entire choral ode in that play presented the union between Jason and Medea as the proof of the unnatural mingling of people and countries caused by the Argonauts' voyage, threatening every social and national identity. Medea's revenge was also interpreted by Seneca as her way to recover her original barbarian identity. Most of the female characters presented by Elizabethan writers as Medea-like were foreigners (Pandora, Violenta, Cleopatra in Sidney's *Antonius*), including Tamora, whose coming to Rome in *Titus Andronicus* represents a sign of the decadence of the State. The evocation of Medea by Othello in III.iii resonates with such echoes. When he declares his intention to pursue revenge, Othello does not look like any Senecan-like avenger: he is implicitly associating himself with one specific Senecan avenger, Medea, the barbarian woman endowed with arcane magic (and it should be noted that Brabantio accuses Othello of having enchanted Desdemona), whose arrival in a civilized space represents a threat to national identity. In other words, by exploiting the implications of the Medea model qualifying male figures as deprived of their own identities, Shakespeare's suggestion of a Medea-like Othello further highlights his relapse into his barbarian self brought about by Iago's lies. In passing, it may be worth pinpointing a curious coincidence. When discussing the relationship between *Othello* and Seneca's *Hercules Oetaeus*, Miola viewed Othello's handkerchief as a counterpart of the tunic bathed in the blood of Nessus the Centaur that caused the hero's death (Miola 1992, 134-35). Along similar lines, it may be argued that the handkerchief recalls the tunic Medea enchants to kill Creusa. Both objects are parts of the family heritage of the two foreigners: Medea's is a gift of the Sun, her grandfather (*Med.*, 570-71), and the handkerchief was given to Othello by his mother (*Oth.*, III.iv.57). As in Seneca's tragedy, Medea's ritu-

seeing him as "a vehicle for racial uplift", sometimes "as a tool for racial oppression" (Thompson in Shakespeare 2016, 84; see also Bassi and Scego 2020 in relation to the use of blackface in 19th and 20th-century Italian reprises of *Othello*). At the same time, new attention has been dedicated to how *Othello* related to black people in Tudor England (on which see the previous note) and how race as a concept is present in the play (on which see Adelman 1997; Neill 2006, 123-30; Bassi 2016, 21-41).

al of enchantment is presented at length (740-848), so in *Othello* the Moor describes to Desdemona the ritual performed by the Egyptian wizard on the handkerchief (III.iv.71-76), a story he will later admit to having invented (V.ii.214-15). But above all, in either case, the two objects bring about the death of those who receive them, Creusa and Desdemona, respectively.

At the outset, I mentioned that Curtis Perry offered a reading of Iago as a character reminiscent of Seneca's Atreus (Perry 2020, 238-52) in so far as like him, Iago too projects onto his victim his own ideas of what a dangerous Other is in order to expel, punish, and repress the phantoms of his own troubled psyche: "Iago [...] creates Othello's monstrosity via a process of projective identification" (250). The idea is not new in studies about *Othello*, as in the last thirty years or so this position has often been voiced to solve the much-discussed question of the otherwise inexplicable reasons behind his behaviour²⁵. In my opinion, Othello's implicit assimilation to Medea is also significant in this regard. As we saw, in Elizabethan receptions of Medea she was often instrumental in expressing social anxieties about dangerous Otherness incarnated by rebellious women, or by fallen men, as threats to national and social identities. Figures akin to her were shown as eventually failing to either get what they wanted or escape the consequences of their actions. If they did not end up being punished (either by the law or by other characters taking revenge on them), they were shown as unable to suppress their own remorse, which led them to their demise. In either case, their failure reasserted the social order they upset. This narrative pattern is also present in *Othello*, where it constitutes the plot of the second part of the play, after Iago convinces Othello of Desdemona's infidelity. However, it originates earlier on, when Iago starts manipulating Othello in order to get revenge on him for depriving him of what he perceives as his rightful place in the world. This is apparent from the very beginning of the play, where Iago is shown lamenting to Roderigo how "his Moorship" (*Othello*, I.i.32)²⁶ denied him the place he deserved as his lieutenant (10, "I know my price, I am worth no

25 Perry himself admits his debt to the article by Janet Adelman 1997; see also Serpieri 2003.

26 See Serpieri 2003 on the ironic undertones of this definition, where "the suffix of prestige and honour *ship* joins in a grotesque oxymoron the lexeme of contempt *Moor*" (Serpieri 2003, 14).

worse a place"). The audience hears Iago suggest that "the lusty Moor" (II.i.293) slept with Emilia (I.iii.386-87, II.i.293-95), thus depriving him of his social role as a husband (Serpieri 2003, 51-53). In these passages Iago, like Brabantio, views Othello as an intruding foreigner, whose action disrupted the traditional order of things, like Medea and the characters she was often compared to. As a result, when Othello starts to behave as a wild Medea-like Moor as a result of Iago's deception, the allusion to the mythical figure of the sorceress highlights Iago's successful transformation of Othello into the negative Other as he envisions him from the outset. In this sense, the Pontic-sea passage not only shows that Othello has once again become his barbarian self, it also suggests that he has become the man Iago thought he was: the dangerous foreigner threatening the social order, who therefore must be repressed and punished.

Othello is not the only character on which Iago projects an image of dangerous Otherness. Desdemona is also subjected to a similar process of projection on Iago's part, in a way that evokes another narrative model that in Elizabethan literature was often related to the figure of Medea. As we have already recalled, the first female characters connected with Medea in Elizabethan literature, such as Pandora and Violenta, were young women rebelling against societal norms by contracting socially unfitting marriages. Desdemona is likewise a potentially rebellious figure. In Act 1, she goes to the Senate to defend her marriage in front of her own father (*Othello* I.iii.180-89), and argues for her right to follow Othello to Cyprus to enjoy "the rites for which [she] love[s] him" (I.iii.258) – an euphemism for sex. Desdemona is thus also revealed as a woman fully conscious of her desire and determined to satisfy it against all conventions²⁷. Moreover, when Desdemona reaches Cyprus, Cassio welcomes her by exclaiming that the sea "omit[ted] / [its] mortal natures, letting go safely by / The divine Desdemona" (II.i.71-73), "our great captain's captain" (74). Iago himself recognizes the power she holds over Othello: "His soul is so en fettered to her love / That she may make, unmake, do what she list" (II.iii.340-41). These lines enhance Desdemona's por-

²⁷ Serpieri points out that Othello, in the account of his seduction of Desdemona, nonetheless suggests that it was her who encouraged him to speak (see I.iii.151-54; Serpieri 2003, 35-39).

trayal as a woman capable of exerting power over men, endowed with courage and valour – all aspects that evoke continuities with negative female figures which writers such as Fenton and Achelley compared to Medea. In a sense, we could say that *Othello* presents the same division of the Medea-model into two characters, one male and one female, which Zanoni observed about Sidney's *Antonius*: Othello inherits from Medea her barbaric foreignness and revengeful fury, Desdemona her transgressive femininity (Zanoni 2021).

Desdemona's eventual fate is also somewhat in line with other Medea-like female characters: abandoned by the man she left everything for, she becomes a figure of despair, whose fate should admonish women not to follow her example. This is precisely the moral of the main source of *Othello*, the novella from Giambattista Giraldi Cinzio's *Gli Ecatommiti* (1565)²⁸:

Temo molto di non esser io quella che dia esempio alle giovani, di non maritarsi contra il voler dei suoi; a che da me le donne italiane imparino di non si accompagnare con uomo, cui la natura, e il Cielo, e il modo della vita disgiunge da noi. (Cinzio 2023, 8)

(I am very much afraid to be the one who offers an example to young women not to marry against the wishes of their parents; and that Italian women may learn from me not to marry a man whom nature, heaven and the way of life separates from us.) (My translation)

We find here the same moralistic tone of Fenton and Achelley's stories about Pandora and Violenta (two other women from Catholic, Mediterranean countries) and, more in general, behind any appearance of Medea in Elizabethan literature: women should obey societal rules, disobedience out of personal desire only leads to disaster. On the surface, Desdemona's fate would seem just another instance of this simple common moral.

However, this is not the case. Shakespeare's Desdemona never shows signs of repentance or regret, she stays true to her word and time and again reaffirms her love for Othello, even after he turns

²⁸ As often contended Shakespeare may have read the novella in Italian, since no English translation appeared until 1735: see e.g. Serpieri 2003, 213-21; Honigmann in Shakespeare 2016, 375-98.

against her (IV.ii.153-66; IV.iii.17-19)²⁹. The supposedly rebellious and lustful woman is revealed to be a devoted, obedient wife, thus creating an evident contrast with her apparently being the protagonist of a story of female rebellion against authority and her eventual failure. This contrast is perceivable even in her speech at the Senate. While she defends her choice to marry the Moor against her father's wishes, she also expresses her resolution to be an obedient wife to Othello: "so much duty as my mother showed / To you, preferring you before her father, / So much I challenge that I may profess / Due to the Moor my lord" (I.iii.186-89). As Michael Neill noted, these are not the words of a rebellious girl rejecting social standards, but rather those of a well-educated woman who knows her place in society and does honestly intend to occupy it the best she could (Neill 2006, 170-71). As much as Desdemona's choice of a husband may be unconventional, her attitude towards her spouse has no rebellious or unbecoming undertones: once her desire to be married to a man of her own choosing is satisfied, she craves for no other satisfaction. Just as Othello is not the wild barbarian some think he is (and only becomes one after Iago has deceived him), so Desdemona is not the lustful, unbridled and dangerous woman who is usually the protagonist of such stories of female rebellion.

Playing around precisely with this model, Iago presents her to Rodrigo as an inconstant wife who will tire of Othello: "When she is sated with his body she will find the error of her choice" (*Othello* I.iii.351-52); "her very nature will instruct her [...] and compel her to some second choice" (II.i.220-33). His degraded portrayal of Desdemona (on which see Serpieri 2003, 65-68) suggests the revolting image of an unnatural woman whose desires are impossible to satiate, a "super-subtle Venetian"³⁰ (I.iii.357) who cannot be trusted. This anticipates the arguments Iago will later use to convince Othello of her betrayal:

IAGO
To be bold with you,
Not to affect many proposed matches

29 We may observe that Shakespeare has Emilia express regret for Desdemona's marriage with Othello, while in Cinzio this is uttered by Desdemona herself: see *Oth.*, IV.ii.127-28.

30 Behind this expression lies the reputation of Venetian women as courtesans in Elizabethan literature, on which see Salkeld 2012, 17-20; Stanton 2015, 135-48.

Of her own clime, complexion and degree,
 Whereto we see, in all things, nature tends –
 Foh! one may smell in such a will most rank,
 Foul disproportion, thoughts unnatural.
 (*Oth.*, III.iii.232-37)

Iago's words in this scene echo what in I.iii Brabantio told the Senate to convince them that Othello bewitched Desdemona ("It is a judgement maimed and most imperfect / That will confess perfection so could err / Against all rules of nature", *Oth.*, I.iii.100-02). He even goes so far as to notice Desdemona's disturbing ability to "seal her father's eyes up" (213-14) as evidence that she is deceiving Othello just as she did her father. Thus, Iago manages to convince Othello that Desdemona represents a threat not only for him, but for society at large: "she must die, else she'll betray more men", is Othello's ultimate self-delusion (V.ii.6). The success of Iago's deception leads him to think of Desdemona as a dangerous, despicable female character, whose rebellion to societal norms reveals her as unnatural and damnable – nothing less than Medea herself in the hands of writers who, like Fenton or Achelley, used her as a term of comparison for negative, violent female characters such as Pandora or Violenta.

Thus, the Pontic-sea passage from the 'seduction scene' acquires a third and final meaning. As he strengthens himself to pursue revenge against his wife, Othello is trying to acquire the same firmness in committing evil as the one Iago insinuated Desdemona possesses as a lascivious woman. Since, by cheating on him, she has proved to be a rebellious woman, dangerous to society – so his argument goes – Othello must be as firm and cruel in punishing her in order to administer justice, without faltering. The audience, however, knows that none of it is real, and that Othello and Desdemona are the victims of the lies of a man who projected onto them a fictitious image of dangerous Otherness which uncannily resembles recurrent Elizabethan interpretations of Medea, here split into two different models: the foreign man intruding into society and questioning its order (Othello), and the woman refusing to conform to social standards (Desdemona). The reference to Seneca's *Medea* at that point of III.iii thus ties into one crucial passage the main themes of *Othello*: the "staging of the damnation of the Other within a bourgeois-puritan civilisation that removes and expels the 'monsters' of its own imagination through projection" (Serpieri 2003, 5).

Conclusion

Curtis Perry was right: although *Othello* may not present an “especially overt [...] engagement with the resources of Senecan tragedy [...] Senecan models nevertheless prove useful throughout for thinking about [it]” (Perry 2020, 251). This is also true once the analysis is expanded to include not just the Senecan tragedies and their Elizabethan translations, but also the reception of the mythical models contained in them and the way they were read, interpreted, and re-imagined in the Elizabethan literary culture. This article has highlighted how the Senecan imitation present in *Oth.*, III.iii.456-61, with its references to some passages of Seneca’s *Medea* involving Pontus (*Sen. Med.*, 404-7, 414-16), connects Shakespeare’s text to a recurrent early modern reception of Medea as a troublesome incarnation of a dangerous, foreign femininity perceived as a threat to social order. As such, Medea as a figure derived mainly from Seneca proved to be a term of comparison, or a model for the characterization of either rebellious women presented as negative figures, or male characters experiencing the loss of their social identity.

As we have seen, this convention is also present in *Othello*, but here it is peculiarly a model for both the male and the female protagonists. It highlights Othello’s perceived loss of his own identity as a member of the European civilisation and his falling back into the barbarous Moor other characters expect him to be underneath his civilized mask. At the same time, it puts Othello’s barbarian relapse into perspective by situating it within the scope of Iago’s own perverse plot of projections of fictional Otherness. From the outset, Iago is shown envisioning Othello as a figure of dangerous Otherness, depriving himself of what he viewed as his rightful place in society. The Pontic-sea passage, in marking the moment Othello starts behaving and talking as a Medea-like avenger, also highlights how Othello at that point begins turning into what Iago thinks him to be. Finally, the passage shows how Iago’s deceptive description of Desdemona as an unscrupulous lusty woman, prey to her desire, echoes the model of negative femininity often associated with Medea – a model the audience of *Othello* probably shared and accepted, but found thwarted in Iago’s false fabrication of a Medea-like Desdemona. In this way, Shakespeare’s use of the Elizabethan Me-

dea imaginary is revealed to be closely tied to the dramatic and thematic cores of *Othello*, providing further evidence of this apparently 'un-Senecan' tragedy's links with Senecan drama and its contemporary reception.

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MISCELLANY

“No Lucrece”: The Ambiguity of Rape in *The Queen of Corinth*

Tommaso Continisio

Through the lens of New Historicism, the protagonists of Jacobean drama are deeply entangled in their social milieu, their identities inseparable from the context enveloping them. This entwined existence leaves them adrift, wrestling with an elusive self-definition, and lost in the absence of a recognisable ‘within’. Confronted with the Other, these characters hover on the edge of identity, navigating a liminal space that blurs the boundaries between self and society. Against this backdrop, I propose a reading of *The Queen of Corinth*, a play presumably written in 1616-1618 by Fletcher, Field, and Massinger. Specifically, I shall attempt to show how Merione, the most important character of the play, reacts to her rape in a way that deviates from the norm, since her courageous solution challenges the prevailing belief that suicide is the sole path to preserve honour. The tragicomic resolution of *The Queen of Corinth* suggests that the wrongdoer should not meet death but rather be forced to marry the victim of his violence – a change consistent with the spirit of Fletcher and his collaborators. Merione’s decision is a momentary claim of her own self, pushing back against the skewed subjectivity imposed by the male characters’ discourses throughout the play.

Keywords: Rape, Tragicomedy, *The Queen of Corinth*, Subjectivity, Lucrece

1. Foreword

Sexual violence – especially the representation of rape – has persistently emerged as a controversial subject, reflecting social attitudes, power struggles, and gender norms. The recurring inclusion of rape imagery in European literature serves as a stark reminder of the pervasive violence against women in Western culture. This issue gains particular significance in early modern English drama, offering playwrights a powerful means to explore the intricacies of human

conduct, ethics, and the prevalent socio-cultural milieu of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Since the late 1970s, feminist criticism has examined the social and historical dimensions of rape. Seminal works like Susan Brownmiller's 1975 *Against Our Wills: Men, Women, and Rape*, Sylvania Tomaselli and Roy Porter's *Rape: A Historical and Social Enquiry* (1986), and Lynn A. Higgins and Brenda R. Silver's 1991 *Rape and Representation*, have significantly contributed to this exploration. However, despite the widespread acknowledgment of rape as a serious social and moral issue, there is considerable debate about its motivations and definition.

Brownmiller's argument hinges on the idea that rape is not primarily about sexual gratification but rather about asserting power and control over women. She contends that rape serves as a conscious tactic to instill fear and maintain the subjugation of women within a patriarchal society. This perspective highlights the systemic nature of rape, emphasising its role in perpetuating gender inequality and silencing women's voices. However, while Brownmiller's analysis provides a rich framework for understanding rape as a manifestation of male power dynamics, it has also been critiqued for its somewhat deterministic approach. Some argue that her emphasis on the political and social aspects of rape may overlook the complex interplay of personal motivations and individual circumstances that often contribute to rape incidents.

Tomaselli (1986, 11-12) further stresses the complexity of this issue. She spotlights the combination of personal motivations and the cultural and symbolic meanings associated with it: rape, she argues, is not just a physical act of violence, but rather a tool to reinforce gender-based power dynamics and limit women's roles in society. In light of this, the insights from Higgins and Silver's work reinforce the idea that rape is shaped by its representation, thereby adding complexity to our efforts to both understand and tackle this social issue.

Higgins and Silver argue that "the politics and aesthetics of rape are one" (1991, 1), a statement which underscores the close link between the narrator's identity and the way the story is told. Viewing rape as a form of representation exposes deeply ingrained patriarchal perspectives that have historically silenced women's voices and experiences in storytelling. Both scholars advocate for an analytical feminist approach, urging a thorough examination of written materials – be they literary works, historical accounts, or other forms of

representation – that may have downplayed, overlooked, or intentionally omitted crucial facets of women's lives and struggles, owing to societal norms, biases, or historical constraints, especially as they pertain to the distressing realities of violence and sexuality.

Higgins and Silver's pioneering research on rape has deeply impacted feminist scholarship on medieval and early modern literature, offering crucial insights into the construction of female subjects. In *Writing Rape, Writing Women in Early Modern England: Unbridled Speech* (1999), Jocelyn Catty dives deep into the intricate crime of rape, unraveling its essence intricately woven into representation. The ontological link to representation leads us into the exploration of medieval and early modern rape narratives, which provide insight into the perception of women as subjects, as Robertson and Rose have noted (2001, 1). These narratives are also grounded in historical frameworks of female sexuality dating back to the classical period. Such frameworks establish enduring models that influence our comprehension as well as the very nature of female subjectivity, as pinpointed by Barbara Baines (2003, 1). She argues that the Renaissance provides a rich context for understanding the development of societal attitudes towards rape, as it entailed a revival of medieval, biblical and classical beliefs, and serves as a foundation for our present-day concerns.

An examination of early modern rape narratives shows a recurring pattern – a tendency to replace instances of sexual violence against women with alternative interpretations that include political symbolism, pornography, or religious and supernatural-driven elements. Thus, rape is very often rationalised or contextualised within a broader mythological framework¹. This intentional erasure mirrors social inclinations to subordinate female subjects, thereby perpetuating the normalisation of inherent sexual violence and, in turn, naturalising it as an essential, unavoidable aspect of the systematic oppression of women. An in-depth analysis

1 Catty (1999, 10) argues that rape can signify either a political tyranny or an individual crime. However, an overemphasis on its political dimensions may unintentionally obliterate the complex power dynamics between the sexes. In her compelling volume, *Representing Rape in Medieval and Early Modern Literature*, Baines (2003, 4) explores the complex interplay between rape and pornography, revealing the subtle erasure of sexual violence within rape narratives. These troubling representations unfairly label women as whores, their refusal paradoxically morphed into consent and their resistance misinterpreted as disturbing sign of desire.

of such narratives exposes the deeply rooted patriarchal structures embedded in representations of rape that are created explicitly to subjugate women. Robertson and Rose suggest a “model of double-reading” (2001, 9), encouraging the examination of rape in literature while maintaining awareness of its violent nature of sexual abuse towards women. This approach leads to better understanding of the narratives and prompts critical exploration of the social forces driving them. It also facilitates meticulous scrutiny of the complexities of gender, power, and representation in early modern literature, granting greater insight.

In early modern England, the definition of rape underwent a nuanced evolution. Unlike today’s clear-cut legal definitions, the inception of rape laws dates back to the Middle Ages, specifically to the Statutes of Westminster I and II (1275, 1285), issued during the reign of Edward I. The intricacy stemmed from the legal term *raptus*, which encompassed a spectrum of meanings, including rape, abduction, forced sexual intercourse, and sexual assault, thus proving the prismatic nature of early modern sexual violence highlighted by scholars such as Corinne J. Saunders (2001, 59-62) and B. J. and Mary Sokol (2003, 108-9). Still, the merging of rape and abduction persisted within the legal definition, reinforcing the conception of women’s bodies and virginity as male property. Nevertheless, Nazife Bashar’s influential research on rape law and historical cases from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries provides evidence that, by the mid-16th century, rape was recognised as a crime against the person, marking a significant shift in legal understanding (1983, 41). Expanding on Bashar’s insights, Amy Greenstadt (2009, 13) contends that past legal documents and manuals used vague or ambiguous language to describe the crime of rape. Yet, as social attitudes and legal understanding progressed, there was a gradual transition towards a clearer, more explicit definition of rape that stressed the lack of consent and violation of a woman’s autonomy over her own body. In legal terminology, this shift implied an improved and victim-centred vision of rape. As a result, this historical backdrop adds depth to our understanding of rape in early modern England, revealing the intertwined nature of the law, culture, and social hierarchies that shaped the legal treatment of sexual offenses during this period².

2 The semantic ambiguity, as noted above, shows a captivating blend of contrasting rape cultures woven into the social fabric of the period. See Aebischer 2004, 25.

Early modern England witnessed significant sociopolitical turns and cultural blossoming, fuelled by a renewed appreciation for classical learning and humanist ideals. This fertile intellectual landscape fostered artistic exploration and literary innovation, with the stage emerging as a powerful platform for playwrights to delve into the complexities of human nature. Within this theatrical world, the performance of rape played a significant role in exploring the social norms and ethical dilemmas mentioned above, as well as the challenges confronted by women in their quest for agency and self-determination amidst stringent social constraints.

Any discourse on rape requires a reference to the story of Lucrece, a narrative that Shakespeare, among other playwrights, masterfully portrayed³. Serving as an iconic representation of female martyrdom, Lucrece's decision to take her own life is a poignant testimony to the extreme ways women may take to gain control of their lives and preserve their dignity. Shakespeare's exploration of rape was a recurring motif throughout his career, featuring prominently in his early works and resurfacing in later plays, such as *Pericles* and *The Tempest*. However, in his earlier compositions (*The Rape of Lucrece* and *Titus Andronicus*), Shakespeare portrayed the atrocity of rape with raw intensity, vividly detailing its brutality. *The Rape of Lucrece* unfolds within the backdrop of ancient Rome; despite the historical uncertainty surrounding the rape narrative, this story depicts a woman as a brutalised victim in patriarchal society. It is acknowledged that Shakespeare's Lucrece drew inspiration from Ovid's *Fasti* (I, 721-852) and Livy's *Ab Urbe condita* (chapters LVII-LX), which had already been disseminated in a number of versions across European countries by Shakespeare's time (Donaldson 1982, 19). In both sources, Lucretia is depicted as a virtuous Roman woman whose tragic fate catalysed the overthrow of the Roman monarchy; both narrating the crime of Lucrece's rape by Sextus Tarquinius, the son of the tyrannical King Tarquin, and her subsequent suicide as an act of atonement for unbearable shame. Her courageous act of self-sacrifice deeply moved the Roman people, leading to a popular uprising and the establishment of the Roman Republic. Following her violation by Tarquin, Lucrece struggles with an overwhelming burden of shame, guilt, and humili-

3 See, among others, Donaldson 1982, Guardamagna 2018, and Pallotti 2013.

ation. In a social framework in which a woman's worth is intimately tied to her chastity, the offence inflicts a lasting stain not only on her personal character, but also on the reputation of her entire family. Her final act, however, constitutes a defiance of the social conventions that have hampered her agency.

2. *An elusive self*

The Queen of Corinth, a tragicomedy co-written by Fletcher, Field, and Massinger⁴ supposedly between 1616 and 1618, presents the convincing argument that rape brings about a loss of integrity, which can be ultimately resolved through marriage to the villain⁵.

The central female character, Merione, calls for significant attention, her theatricality stemming from Fletcher's linguistic prowess and the collective dramatic vision of the three playwrights. In particular, Merione's response to the rape she endures stands out as she proposes a solution that sets her apart from the literary code, challenging the Christological stance of raped women who saw suicide as the only means to preserve their honour. Merione's decision is an attempt to temporarily assert her identity, considering that her unbalanced subjectivity has been shaped by the speeches of male characters throughout the play. In this light, the rape, and especially her response to it, may figure as part of an elaborate plan devised by the victim to assert her own self.

Except for cases such as *Promos and Cassandra* and *The Spanish Gypsy*, or *Measure for Measure*, in which the raped women end up by marrying their assailants, other plays addressing rape, like Shake-

4 The co-authorship is supported by Cyrus Hoy's statement that there are "three distinct patterns of language preferences present" (Hoy 1959, 95).

5 Set in ancient Greece, the play explores the power dynamics of Corinth, a city-state ruled by a virtuous Queen and her villainous son, Theanor. Merione, initially promised to Theanor, is later married off to the Argosian ruler, Agenor, as part of a political negotiation. The deal enrages Theanor, who rapes Merione in revenge against Agenor, and falsely accuses Euphanes, the Queen's favourite ward, of the deed. The plot unfolds through a series of escalating tensions, including conflicts, duels, and hostage-taking incidents. After committing a second rape, Theanor is put on trial for his offences, but surprising revelations come to the forefront. An unforeseen twist ensues, resulting in Theanor's pardon by Merione and union with her.

spere's *Titus Andronicus*, Heywood's *The Rape of Lucrece*, Middleton's *The Revenger's Tragedy* and *Hengist, King of Kent*, Fletcher's *The Tragedy of Valentinian*, to name but a few, are inherently tragic. Despite their unequivocal condemnation of the crime, they sympathise with the victims, allowing the audience to grasp their plight in the face of a devastating fate. Instead, *The Queen of Corinth* marks a significant change from tragedy to tragicomedy in its approach to the subject and in moral perspective. Suzanne Gossett (1984, 305) attributes the shift to the prevailing atmosphere of the late Jacobean court, stained by sexual misconduct, impropriety, decadence. This move toward tragicomedy ushers new elements, including the survival of the violated woman and the lack of punishment for the evil-doer. Such departure from the traditionally moral stance is patent since, in the end, the guilty party will not face death but the obligation to marry his victim.

According to the perspective of New Historicism, the identity of the Jacobean drama characters is intricately woven into the fabric of their social environment; their sense of self does not lie within, for no distinct 'within' allows itself to be defined⁶. Instead, when confronted with the Other, these characters hover on the edge of identity, navigating a liminal space that blurs the boundaries between self and society. Only in the fervent debate on selfhood along the twentieth century, particularly with Freud and Lacan, theories about the ambiguous nature of identity, its potential fragility, and the claim for it will take deeper roots.

Massinger, Fletcher, and Field explore an unfamiliar hypothesis about the self in Merione's experience of, and reaction to, rape. She is represented in embracing the belief that her unique physiological and psychological heritage, particularly her lost chastity, has

6 Hamlet's "I've that within which passeth show", in *Hamlet*, I.ii.88, exemplifies this concept. Consider, for instance, the fifth-century reflections of St. Augustine, who pondered man's innate depravity and his enforced separation from God-given innocence: the nature of humanity being predetermined, each individual is born as a prisoner of inherent sinfulness. Building on Augustine's ideas, Calvin further shaped the notion of the divinely ordained state of the individual, a concept that profoundly influenced the theology of the emerging Church of England. These perspectives, both ancient and modern, share a common belief that the self is, to some extent, shaped by pre-existing theological and socio-political frameworks.

been tarnished by the traumatic experience: in her poignant expression, “been forc’d and broken, lost my lustre” (*The Queen of Corinth*, II.iii.159-60⁷) we feel echoes of despair and self-loathing. The violation has led her to see herself as a contaminating disease within society – “I am nothing now but a maine pestilence / Able to poysen all” (II.iii.103-4), a nameless and unrecognisable thing:

MERIONE

I am now I know not what: praye ye look not on me,
No nameis left me, nothing to inherit,
But the detested, base, and branded –
(II.iii.120-22)

In an effort to escape her wretchedness, Merione contemplates self-sacrifice by marrying her rapist. Interestingly, Agenor, Merione’s intended husband, tries to reassure her that her rape was an involuntary act, insisting that “the stain was forced upon you” (II.iii.151). He further describes her as “more virgin than all her sex” (II.ii.31) in an attempt to console her. Yet, Merione remains unconvinced, believing that only through a marriage to the rapist can the social stigma be removed. Gossett (1984, 327) argues that by treating rape in a tragicomic way, *The Queen of Corinth* portrays it in the same light as other sexual impulses dealt with in comedy, and implies that they are natural and, therefore, can be managed through marriage. This perspective may suggest that rape was used to prove the manliness of Merione’s future husband. Against all odds, she endorses a union with her rapist as a privilege, (“The Rape on me gives me the priviledge / To be his Wife, and that is all I sue for”, V.iv.70-71). Such a supposedly desperate choice underscores her deep internal struggle, wrestling with the loss of her former self and the social pressure to restore her honour through a questionable union (Curran Jr. 2010, 105).

Merione’s conscious experience of loss raises the prospect of a perspicuous self, albeit ironically unrecognised. Her potential for individuality seems to have been eradicated from her psyche, leading

7 All references are taken from vol. VI of *The Works of Beaumont and Fletcher*, edited by A. R. Waller, published in 1908 as part of the Cambridge English Classics series. Unless otherwise indicated, citations from *The Queen of Corinth* will include only the reference to act, scene, and line(s).

to an attempt to relinquish her right to self-possession. Clearly, Merione's sense of self is intertwined with the pattern of social construction; she is a product of societal expectations. Before her assault, she epitomised submission to her brother Leonidas and the Queen, her honour tied to her chastity; after the defilement of her body, however, she becomes dependent on external forces to shield her from the threat of social ostracism. Merione's possibilities for self-fashioning are constrained within a patriarchal framework: she is given the options of isolation as a whore, or nun, or of marriage to her torturer, thus shedding light on her bent to mercy.

Merione's act of rescuing Theanor by means of sacrificing herself in marriage (the obliteration of a woman's selfhood⁸) questions the concept of self-determination and obscures all notions of agency in self-fashioning. However, this act paradoxically asserts her autonomy as she successfully demands marriage, thus losing her will within the confines of the marital union. In this context, Merione's concept of self-fashioning remains an illusion, lacking effective agency within the culturally deterministic constraints of early Stuart England. As a consequence, Merione's final act in the play leads to two irreconcilable conclusions about her sense of self. The stubborn determination to marry Theanor proposes conflicting theories: on the one hand, she is capable of asserting her will; on the other hand, her selfhood, shaped by prevailing social perceptions of women, is dependent on custom, which insists that her only chance of security is to unite with her aggressor. In the latter scenario, freedom takes on an ironic position: while she frees herself from social ostracism, she is trapped within the bond of marriage, thereby forfeiting her self-possession. To regain her honour, Merione has to compromise her identity by submitting to her husband, a sacrifice that is symbolic of her struggle to balance personal autonomy and societal norms.

In line with Greenblatt's suggestions (1980, 9), individuals build their identities, incorporating aspects or contradictions that can lead to the subversion or loss of the identity they have called for. This observa-

8 Marriage seen as a potentially unfavourable experience for women, who may end up in a worse condition than before, is exemplified in Moll's famous quotation from *The Roaring Girl* by Middleton and Dekker: "marriage is but a chopping and changing, where a maiden loses one head and has a worse i'th'place" (II.ii.43-45).

tion resonates with Merione's experience, where her self-fashioning occurs at the intersection of imposed external authority and her realisation of what she has lost. While early modern England may not have consciously embraced a Cartesian philosophy, *The Queen of Corinth* serves as an indication that Jacobean England, at least implicitly, viewed human nature through a subjectivist lens – albeit with limitations.

3. Rape/Ravishment

The Queen of Corinth departs from traditional classical models and contemporary plays in which a violated woman typically resorts to self-slaughter as a means of atonement. In this tragicomic representation of rape, the female character is victimised and dishonoured; however, contrary to the conventional narrative thread, Merione chooses to marry her rapist, who has now redeemed himself from his sinful act of lust. This departure from the expected formula of rape, therefore, carries deeper implications. The swerve from the classical model in this play becomes clear in Act 2, after Merione's rape: acted as though it were "the Fable of *Proserpines Rape*" (IV.iii.83), Crates and Theanor claim that she "must and will conceal it" (II.iii.21), strengthening their vision with the statement "The woman is no *Lucrece*" (II.iii.22). This remark harbours ambiguity: is Merione not akin to Lucrece, embodying both the exemplary and the unideal aspects of chastity, or does she possess a resilience that her Roman predecessor could not command?⁹ Various interpretations are possible, yet it is undeniable that in being "no Lucrece", Merione explores different paths after the wrong she has suffered.

Until the tragic violation, Merione's self-perception was marked by her alleged lack of eloquence. She yielded to her brother Leonidas's decision on her marrying Agenor¹⁰ with a weak argument: "you may lead me / Whither you please" (I.ii.49-50), but her language

9 However, Lucrece's narrative provides Merione with a framework for her possible behaviour: "I have read / Somewhere I am sure, of such an injury / Done to a Lady: and how she durst dye" (II.ii.138-40).

10 Leonidas points out to Merione that Theanor's affections are not under his own control but are subject to the approval of his mother: "the Queene his Mother / Must give allowance, which to you is barr'd up" (I.ii.27-8). This privilege is currently denied to Merione.

changes after the assault. Despite refraining from direct revenge on her rapist, her insistence on marrying him appears as a subtle form of retribution, not explicitly commented upon by the playwrights. Merione's insistence on her tarnished self might not be a result of internalised social beliefs about raped women, but rather a reflection of her desire to chart a positive future for both herself and Theanor, especially if Theanor survives. Could Merione be engaging in a form of dissimulation, a strategy often imposed on female characters in some of the plays of the period? It is a possibility worth considering. Paradoxically, however, her pursuit of revenge may not be aimed at her assailant, Theanor, who is referred to as the "evil Prince" in the *dramatis personæ*, but rather at his mother, the unnamed queen of the play, whose acts marred Merione's happiness. Nonetheless, the brutality she suffered becomes an opportunity for her to challenge her brother's and the Queen's authority.

Following the peaceful resolution of Corinth's war with Argos, the Queen arranged a dynastic marriage between Agenor and Merione. Theanor, previously betrothed to Merione, was furious at losing his intended bride and chose to turn his initial love rhetoric ("A blessing, 'tis not in the Fates to equall [...] what once / I lov'd above my selfe", I.iii.87-91) into rage through a heinous act of abduction and rape (shrouded in darkness and disguised, to make himself unidentifiable). Indeed, the mother plays the part of a queen so deeply committed to the cause of justice that she would be ready to endure even the execution of her own son. Her influence permeates the stage even when she is not on it, inciting rebellious reactions from the characters in the play – especially Theanor and Merione. Such an interpretation could enhance the depth of the play's title and highlight the intricacies of power and agency within the text.

After the rape, Merione enters the stage "*as newly ravished*" (II.i.SD); she then implores her abuser to marry her and delivers a melancholic monologue spanning fifty-one lines, culminating in her dramatic fainting. Rather than simply wallowing in despair, however, Merione confronts the agent of what she considers an "unmanly violence" (II.i.24) and urges him to think upon marriage as a means of cleansing the wrong committed. The reference to her "fair temple" (II.i.27) being sacrilegiously robbed conveys a violation of her dignity and purity. Despite the brutality she experienced, Merione surpris-

ingly shows a willingness to forgive and move forward, appealing to the conscience of the villain. The introduction of a dagger, referred to as “medicine”, adds a dramatic touch; it is a reminder of Lucrece’s motif, indicating Merione’s initial disposition to face extreme consequences – either for the sake of justice or resolution¹¹. Nonetheless, the use of the term ‘ravished’ in the stage direction is ambiguous if compared to the more decisive ‘raped’, which clearly denotes the violent taking of something that belongs to somebody else. Ravishment brings forth implications of “transport”, “rapture”, and “ecstasy”, implying being swept away by intense emotions¹² (Catty 1999, 14). It connotes ravishment as a manifold emotional experience, one that may not be entirely unwelcome or fraught with conflicting feelings. Barbara Baines (2003, 87), much like the ancient philosopher St. Augustine before her, explored the possibility that there were unforeseen emotional moments for Lucrece in the midst of tragedy, which defied the conventional victim archetype. This daring perspective significantly resonates with Merione’s experience, particularly given her complex feelings for Theanor. As a result, the scene becomes intriguingly ambiguous, thickening the tragicomic plot and inviting the reader to untangle the threads of the story.

It is unclear whether Merione adopts “an antic disposition”, similar to Hamlet’s feigned madness, to mask her intent for revenge, or if the villain’s act has drastically changed her personality. Yet, the following stage direction adds an element of surprise: “*Enter sixe disguis’d, singing and dancing to a horrid Musick, and sprinkling water on her face*” (II.i.SD). The sprinkling of water on Merione’s face suggests a somewhat perverted baptismal ritual, granting her a rebirth after metaphorically experiencing death (having lost her virgin identity). This newfound life empowers her with an unforeseen strength, yet again distinguishing her from the classical figure of Lucrece.

As one can expect from a tragicomedy, especially one by Fletcher, *The Queen of Corinth* features complex plot twists and reaches a crescendo with Theanor’s thirst for revenge with performing a new rape, this

11 See footnote 9.

12 Possibly, an allusion to John Donne’s *Holy Sonnet 14*, “Except you enthrall me, never shall be free / Nor ever chaste, except you ravish me”, suggesting a longing for a deep, transformative, and all-encompassing spiritual experience.

time on Beliza, a beautiful heiress of Corinth and Euphanes's beloved. Upon learning of Theanor's intention to violate her, his friend Crates reports the matter to the Queen in a state of indignation. This situation echoes, for instance, the delicate dynamics of Isabella's substitution for Mariana in *Measure for Measure*. Motivated by her love for Theanor, Merione willingly takes the place of Beliza, thus exposing herself to what is vividly described as "a second Ravishment" (V.iv.110).

4. *An ironic happy ending*

Theanor is put on trial by the Queen herself, who reads Lycurgus's law against the rape of virgins, which empowers the victim to select the rapist's fate: either marriage or execution. Both women, Beliza and Merione, have the right to claim retribution: the former, dressed in sombre black, seeks execution, while the latter, dressed in white, commands marriage. Merione criticises Beliza's attempt to execute Theanor, deeming it as "bloody" (V.iv.117); she implores the court to be "the image of Joves throne", to intercede "between [Theanor] and his Justice", and suggests a "mild sentence" that aligns with the Queen's position as a mother and a rightful ruler (V.iv.102-06). In contrast, Beliza emphasises her claim with legal boundaries: Shylock-like, she emphatically "demand[s] but what / The Law allowes me" (V.iv.67-68), claiming that granting clemency to a repeat rapist would be an offence to justice. Both women continuously plead for mercy and justice¹³, mirroring the dynamics in Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*, while the courtiers praise the Queen for her stern and "masculine constancy" (V.iv.129). While a modern reader may view the courtiers' adulation of the Queen's "masculine constancy" with scepticism, it actually celebrates her as a paragon of justice to the extent of likening her to the Roman Cato (V.iv.136). In the end, the Queen's decision is both fair and wise: she shows intellectual sagacity in recognising the underlying purpose of Lycurgus's law. Acknowledging the severity of Theanor's wrongdoing, she deems marriage an unsuitable course of action for a man guilty of such villainy. On the other hand, Theanor, seeking redemption, submits to his fate yet implores per-

13 Nancy Cotton Pearse notes that the main focus here is not only on chastity, but instead on the clash between mercy and justice (Pearse 1973, 158).

mission to wed Merione prior to his passing, in an effort to restore her honour. In turn, Euphanes reveals that the alleged second rape was a bed trick orchestrated by Merione without Theanor's knowledge. The unfolding drama takes unexpected turns, and Euphanes's revelation makes it clear that Theanor has 'only' committed one rape, leading him to marry Merione, while Beliza finds marital bliss with her lover, Euphanes. The lustful Queen is also content as she proposes to Prince Agenor, who happily accepts ("a blessing which I durst not hope for", V.iv.231). In *The Queen of Corinth*, the law is restorative and provides healing for the wounds of rape; a tragicomic resolution is finally achieved.

In this complex scenario, Merione's substitution for Beliza blurs the distinction between rape and marital intercourse. The original violation of Merione morphs into a twisted form of the bed-trick device, culminating in the consummation of the marriage that was initially intended for Theanor and Merione. Merione's act of self-sacrifice, replacing Beliza, transforms the act of rape into one of seemingly consensual intercourse.

Steeped in melancholy, obliterated by marriage woes, and socially tainted by the stigma of rape, Merione survives the final act, remaining physically alive. "No *Lucrece*", she has willingly handed control over to Theanor, submitting to his ownership and authority without the physical self-destruction of *Lucrece*. This action underscores the recurring stereotype of women as commodities, with marriage imposing further restrictions on the already limited freedom Merione enjoyed in her fatherless status at the beginning of the play – later hindered by her brother and the Queen's influence. Initially positioned as a state commodity – a symbolic gesture of peace to Prince Agenor and a signifier of the end of the war – she later becomes a commodity of the micro-state, the family economic unit. Here, she becomes both literally and symbolically subservient, doomed to the ruling prince, Theanor. Merione's choice stands for an ambiguous form of suicide, as she deliberately obliterates her identity without physically destroying herself. This prompts questions about subjectivity, especially concerning women in the early Stuart period. Interestingly, Merione seems to believe in the existence of a subjective self, which she actually attempts to suppress – an ironic situation where self-fashioning is undermined by social and cultural forces. The rape of Merione is

emblematic of this pervasive patriarchal hegemony, which implies that a woman may resort to self-destruction in response to such a violation – either literally, as seen in the case of Lucrece, or symbolically, with Merione. Her decision to take up an identity forged by her husband is Merione's sole effort at autonomy. For this reason, *The Queen of Corinth* provides a conflation of self and cultural construction, with an ongoing uncertainty regarding the legitimacy of either.

In her final act, Merione embodies a Christ-like role that exhibits pardon and redemption. The act of marrying her oppressor and forgiving him metaphorically kills her, symbolising the end of her former life and the loss of her innocence. Her selflessness and magnanimity breathe life into Theanor, thus showcasing the transformative power of absolution and redemption. The play takes on the form of a tragicomedy that sheds a final irony on the Queen and Leonidas, the architects of the tragic outset. Only if Merione truly and independently wanted to marry Theanor, irrespective of societal expectations, would the ironic victory be theirs alone. If that were the case, then I agree with the Queen's feelings in the play's last lines: "Then on unto the Temple, where the rights / Of marriage ended, we'll finde new delights" (V.iv.234-35).

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Voicing the Unspeakable. Political Dissent in Three Early Modern Plays

Rossana Sebellin

This paper explores how the lower classes voice discontent or political dissent in an acceptable balance between insubordination and formal respect of authority in three early modern texts written between the 1590s and the first decade of the 17th century. The plays under analysis are *The Life of Jack Straw* and *Thomas of Woodstock* (both anonymous) and Shakespeare's *Richard II*, which all deal with the same sovereign and his reign, characterised by three main crises. Despite their distinct approaches, they all address political grievances and present their own interpretations of monarchy, political power and the role of kingship. The comparison shows interesting shifts in the vision of the commonwealth and in the perception of power in a clear progression towards radicalisation in the criticism of the king, which leads to the later Civil War.

Keywords: *Jack Straw*, *Thomas of Woodstock*, *Richard II*, Political dissent, Drama

This paper examines three history plays centred around the figure of Richard II who ruled between 1377 and 1399 and whose reign was characterised by three significant crises: the peasant revolt of 1381, the first crisis involving the young king and the Lord Appellants (1388 ca.) and the final crisis when Bolingbroke, the future Henry IV, deposed Richard and (supposedly) had him killed. The three plays under consideration are the anonymous *The Life and Death of Jack Straw*, Shakespeare's *Richard II* and the anonymous *Thomas of Woodstock*¹. The paper will focus on the idea of political unrest, dissent and open rebellion, and the way these elements are depicted in the plays ac-

1 This last text, existing in only one manuscript lacking the external folio containing the first and last page, has no title and has been variously titled in the course of its editorial history, varying from *Richard II Part One* to *Thomas of Woodstock*. For a complete list of editions and titles, see Sebellin forthcoming, 31-32.

ording to three main subjects: 1. the attitude towards the King (specifically, in this case, the portrayal of an unfit, corrupt, tyrannical King) and monarchy in general from the point of view of the characters in the play and the playwright's; 2. the attitude towards rebellious people, again from the point of view of the characters in the play and the playwright's; 3. the voice of the protest: the people's words expressing dissent and rebellious opinions. The first of the three plays, *Jack Straw*, was published twice: in 1593 by Danter and in 1604 by Pavier. Shakespeare's *Richard II* was published several times between 1597 and 1608 (Q1 1597, Q2 and Q3 1598, Q4 1608, and later Q5 1615, F 1623), but was probably composed around 1595. As is common knowledge, Act 4 (the so-called deposition or Parliament scene) only appears in Q4 and in the Folio, conceivably for censorship reasons. *Thomas of Woodstock* presents yet a different situation, as the one extant copy, preserved at the British Library (MS Egerton 1994), is a manuscript, possibly a prompt book, and there are no known published copies until 1870: there are currently twelve modern editions, starting from the 1870 one to the more recent 2022 one. The composition date of this anonymous play is a hotly debated topic: usually considered a source for Shakespeare's tragedy, therefore pre-1595, in more recent decades this date has been questioned and composition postponed to the beginning of the seventeenth century (by Jackson, Lake, Montini, Gabriel Egan and myself²). There are several valid reasons to postpone the composition date of *Thomas of Woodstock* to the beginning of the seventeenth century, thus inverting the reciprocal influences with the more widely read *Richard II* by Shakespeare: lexical, stylistic and metric reasons (Jackson 2001), the markings of the Master of the Revels George Buc, active after 1603, and identified by Frijlinck (1929) and Lake (1983), the use of *ye* as studied by Montini (2012), the featuring of specific musical instruments such as trumpets and cornets never employed before 1609 (Lake 1983).

Before addressing the comparative analysis of the three texts, a brief outline of the political context in which they were composed and staged is mandatory, as the Tudor era brought a new idea of monarchy and management of power, an innovation never upheld before in England. According to Kristin Bezio, "Henry VIII's reign

2 For a summary of the debate on composition date, see Sebellin forthcoming, 14-26.

put forth a ‘doctrine of absolute non-resistance to the king – a novel doctrine [...] which had enjoyed little vogue during the middle ages.’ [...] The need to publicize non-resistance indicates that the doctrine was not universally accepted, but the fact that such a doctrine was published at all nevertheless confirms its increasing prominence” (Bezio 2015, 27; the quotation within is from Van Baumer 1966, 85). A new political philosophy was slowly but steadily overcoming the ancient idea of an elected king favoured by Germanic tribes in the early Middle Ages (see Ciocca 1987, 170ff) and still somewhat residually present before the advent of Henry VII. It is in this liminal space between a medieval idea of *communitas* as a natural counterbalance to the power of the king and its limitations via the parliament, and the idea of an increasingly absolute power to be fought and rebelled against, that these three plays are interesting to look at.

Therefore, a comparison of the way authors depicted both kingship on the one hand, and rebellious people on the other, is useful to perceive the evolution of a political attitude: the balance between those two political standpoints shows a clear shift in perspective, possibly leading to the Puritan uprising and the Civil War. The emphasis of this article, then, is on the anonymous *Thomas of Woodstock*, which stands out in its treatment of political unrest when compared with the other two tragedies. Most scholars, as shown below, recognise the peculiar position of this text among histories in general, but it is when scrutinised next the other two that this difference in political attitude stands out more clearly. In light of what will be developed below, the correct order of composition needs to be altered as follows: *Jack Straw*, *Richard II*, *Thomas of Woodstock*.

1. *The Life and Death of Jack Straw*

The first text to be dealt with is *Jack Straw*, which depicts the notorious historical figure of Wat Tyler, probably one and the same with Jack Straw, who was popular throughout the early modern era and is even mentioned several times by Dickens in *Bleak House*. This character was also the subject of popular ballads, and was so evidently appealing to the reading public that the play was published twice, as already mentioned. The subject presents some similarities with the even more popular narration of Robin Hood: the underage King is

preserved from criticism by the rebels, who considers themselves the true loyal subjects, almost to the end of the play. The real villains are, as often happens, the members of the court: John of Gaunt in particular. So here again, as in *Robin Hood*, there is a good King Richard and a bad King John (the Duke of Lancaster, John of Gaunt, claimed the throne of Castile).

The brief play (1,200 lines in all) is divided into four acts and describes the events which occurred in 1381, culminating in the so-called peasant revolt. The text opens with a tussle originating over the abuse committed by a tax collector (the infamous poll tax levied to finance the Hundred Years War) against the underage daughter of the protagonist, Jack Straw. The tax collector is killed in the fray and the revolt snowballs from that minor, peripheral event and culminates in London. "First performed in 1592, the anonymous *Life and Death of Jack Straw* is one of the earliest history plays to focus entirely on a lower-class-revolt [...]. Based on Richard Grafton's *Chronicle* (1569), Raphael Holinshed's *Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland* (1577, 1587) and John Stow's *Chronicles of England* (1580), the play dramatizes Elizabethan narratives about the 1381 Peasant's Rising" (Mathur 2007, 37). The sources are, however, treated with the customary unreliability: in the sources it is Wat Tyler and not Jack Straw who is killed by the Mayor of London for disrespecting the King, while Jack Straw is later apprehended and condemned to death; in the play the opposite occurs. The issue is partly due to the confusing reports regarding the identity of the leaders of the revolt: some scholars claim that Jack Straw is a nickname for Wat Tyler and that they are one and the same; in later chronicles they appear as two individuals (see Pettitt 1984, 8, and Brie 1906; for a summary and recapitulation of the difference with the sources, see also Muse Adkins 1949).

This text is generally considered a very simplistic one, politically conservative and quite crude (see Muse Adkins 1949). Only Schilling (2008) advocates for a radical position expressed in the play and considers the conclusion, where the rebellious commoners are all defeated, killed or executed, a perfunctory homage to the establishment and to the necessity of avoiding censorship. The brief introduction to the Malone Society Reprint of *The Life and Death of Jack Straw*, issued in 1957 and edited by Kenneth Muir, states that "[n]othing is known about the date of composition, nor about the authorship. It

has been ascribed to George Peele by a number of the critics on what would appear to be insufficient evidence: for, although Peele could, on occasion, write very badly, none of his acknowledged plays is so destitute of poetry as this" (Muir 1957, v).

Jack Straw no doubt shows a radical group of people who initially are only trying to be heard by the King in connection to abuses they have suffered by the hands of tax collectors ("The king God wot knowes not whats done by such poore men as we, / But wele make him know it", *The Life and Death of Jack Straw*, from now on, *JS*, I.i.61-62). From an initial Edenic egalitarianism of religious origin ("But I am able by good scripture before you to proue, / That God doth not this dealing allow nor loue. / But when *Adam* delued, and *Eue* span, / VWho was then a Gentleman", *JS*, I.i.80-83). A few examples suffice to show that the bold, at times extreme statements of the rebels, thought initially justifiable in the light of the outrageous treatment they received, soon turn to an execrable and totally condemnable behaviour: the group veers to radical positions and steadily refuses to stand down even when they are promised pardon by the King: "We will haue all the Rich men displaste [displaced] / And all the brauerie of them defaste [defaced]", *JS*, I.i.113-14; "God amarcie, Wat, and ere we haue done, / VVe will be Lords euerie one", *JS*, II.i.515-16; "VVe come to reunge your Officers ill demeanor / And though we haue kild him for his knauerie, / Now we be gotten together, we will haue wealth and libertie", *JS*, III.i.702-05; "I came for spoile and spoile Ile haue" *JS*, III.i.757. The rebels are described (albeit by the aristocracy surrounding the King) as unnatural (15 occurrences) and unjust (1); lawful subjects are by opposition labelled as natural (twice).

The end is therefore quite obvious: they must be punished. Historically, more than 1,500 people were killed during the revolt or as a consequence of it, condemned to death by the King or his officials (among which Thomas of Woodstock and Tresilian, discussed below).

Nonetheless, the underlying royalist position of the playwright can be discerned in his attitude towards the figure of the King, which is almost invariably positive. The appositions to the King are the most traditional and conservative ones: anointed, lawful (4 occurrences each), true succeeding (2), "Gods visgerent" (once, I.iv.439), natural Liege (once). The young sovereign is portrayed almost hagiographically, animated by a sincere love of his people: "I maruaile

much my Lords what rage it is, / That moues my people whom I loue so deare, / Vnder a show of quarrel good and iust, / To rise against vs thus in mutinies, / VVith threatening force against our state and vs" (*JS*, I.iv.338-42). Richard II is shown as a merciful, patient, forgiving King who reluctantly condemns to death only the "archrebels" (IV.i.1108), John Ball and Wat Tyler, sparing all the others led astray by the leaders of the revolt. In general, "the rebels and the king have mutual regard, [but] no such rapport exists between commoners and nobles. [...] Indeed the attitude of the nobles is the harsher" (Muse Adkins 1949, 63; 64): this is a peculiar attitude that only this text exhibits among the three examined here.

No issue is ever raised discussing the figure of the King, neither in the attitude of the playwright (understandably so), nor in the rebel's words, who only turn truly disrespectful at the end of the play, after their demands of "wealth and libertie" (repeated several times in III.i) are wilfully met by the King with a general promise of "liberty and pardon" (*JS*, III.i.712). Wealth is not, apparently, something even a saintly King is inclined to give.

2. *Richard II*

In his introduction to *The Movement Towards Subversion. The English History Plays from Skelton to Shakespeare*, Sterling argues that Shakespeare's histories question authority and divine right: "in the chapter on *Richard II*, I discuss Shakespeare's demystification of divine right and the king's two bodies through the playwright's purposeful telescoping of history, through his altering of chronicle history, and through his characterization of Richard" (Sterling 1996, x).

It is certainly true that the guilt of Richard II in his uncle's murder is hinted at and even stated openly (*Richard II*, from now on *R2*, I.ii.4-5 and 37-41; I.iii.154-58) and that he is portrayed as an incompetent king, especially if compared to the more savvy Bolingbroke, but it is also true that this position is heavily counterbalanced by the idea of Richard as a Christ-like figure, also openly referred to in the tragedy (see Smith 2011); by the use of the term "depose" and "deposed", of clear religious origin and mainly employed by Richard himself; by the idea that this act of deposition/usurpation is the original sin causing the War of the Roses, repeatedly

mentioned by York, Carlisle and the King. In this play Shakespeare seems to portray these two irreconcilable positions, lawful deposition vs. aberrant usurpation, giving both very substantial weight, so much so that any minimal shift in perspective modifies the final reconstruction and historical judgement of the events. Exactly as happens in anamorphic painting, fashionable at the time and explicitly mentioned in the text: "Like perspectives, which, rightly gazed upon / Show nothing but confusion; eyed awry, / Distinguish form" (R2, II.ii.18-20).

The famous deposition or parliament scene (the very terms abolish the possibility of neutrality, as each term is politically charged), excised from publications during Elizabeth's reign and reinstated later on, is open to a double interpretation: a necessary and rightful act involving the parliament and public participation (the idea of *communitas* represented by the public viewing the performance), or a tragic, sacrilegious act, with grievous outcome for the commonwealth.

In Shakespeare, therefore, the king – though neither innocent nor saintly – is seen as a sacred figure, which cannot be touched without dire consequences befalling the nation. The recurrence of terms like "sacred", "anointed" and the like is striking. Richard, his figure and his body are described in terms that admit no doubt as to the sacrality of his role. He is at various times designated as anointed, as in the following quotations: "God's substitute, / His deputy **anointed** in His sight" (R2, I.ii.37-38); "Commit'st thy **anointed** body to the cure" (R2, II.i.98); "Come'st thou because the **anointed** king is thence" (R2, II.iii.96); "Not all the water in the rough rude sea / Can wash the balm off from an **anointed** king" (R2, III.ii.54-55); "And shall the figure of God's majesty, / His captain, steward, deputy elect, / **Anointed**, crowned, planted many years" (R2, IV.i.126-28).

Overall, in the tragedy we find a total of 5 anointed, 1 rightful, 8 sacred (variously labelled: king 1, head 1, blood 3, sceptre 1, state 2). And even if he is an unfit king, Richard is no doubt the character where our sympathy lies: he may be portrayed as proud and aloof at the beginning, self-absorbed and misruled by his sycophants, but he soon turns into a heart-breaking, doleful figure, whose parable we follow with mixed feelings of pity and reproach.

On the other hand, in *Richard II* the people are scarcely mentioned and play a very minor role. They are generally described by the king

and courtesans in disparaging terms, in contrast with Bolingbroke's affinity with commoners. Richard labels his subjects as "slaves" (R2, I.iv.26), he and his flatterers mock the newly exiled Hereford's attitude towards the commoners and their love for him: "Off goes his bonnet to an oyster-wench. / A brace of draymen bid God speed him well, / And had the tribute of his supple knee", R2, I.iv.31-33. The mob is also described as a faceless monster, insulting the defeated king and throwing "dust and rubbish" on him, when he enters London on foot, following the new king on horse. The description is given by the sympathetic York to his Duchess, and Richard is described as a meek, Christ-like figure proceeding towards Golgotha after he has relinquished the crown (R2, V.ii.1-40). The only instance of a commoner actually speaking in the play is in the garden scene, when the Gardener expounds in a highly metaphorical language, and in verse, Richard's guilt in neglecting his duty as a monarch, who has disregarded his kingdom and let parasites and courtesans thrive and grow too prominent. Although the Gardener is quite explicit in describing the situation of the kingdom as an unkempt garden, when one of his men expresses a mildly critical observation ("Why should we in the compass of a pale / Keep law and form and due proportion, / [...] When our sea-walled garden, the whole land, / Is full of weeds, her fairest flowers choked up, / Her fruit trees all unpruned, her hedges ruined, / Her knots disordered and her wholesome herbs / Swarming with caterpillars?", R2, III.iv.40-47, hardly a seditious speech at all), he is immediately chided by his master: "Hold thy peace. / He that hath suffered this disordered spring / Hath now himself met with the fall of leaf" (R2, III.iv.47-49).

3. *Thomas of Woodstock*

This anonymous play relates the events of the second crisis of the reign of Richard II, the one occurring around the year 1388, even though the author is quite careless with his sources (Holinshed, mainly) and coalesces in the span of a few months events spanning from 1382 (Richard's marriage to Anne of Bohemia) to the apprehension of Tresilian (executed in 1388), the death of Greene (1399) and of Woodstock himself (1397). In depicting these events, historical figures belonging to a later period are merged in the play and depicted ac-

ording to the playwright's needs rather than to historical accuracy. Thomas of Woodstock, the main character and a tragic figure, is here represented as meek and gentle, at times righteously enraged by the young king's behaviour, but generally respectful and temperate. The sources, on the other hand, tell a very different story and Woodstock is usually represented as ambitious, ruthless and fierce.

The young king in this play is immediately shown as guilty and plotting: the first scene opens with the attempted poisoning of the king's uncles, and even though the King is ultimately called innocent of this deed, and the entire responsibility is laid with his plotting minions, in the course of the play Richard is often seen in agreement with his sycophants when not openly instigating schemes against his uncles.

If compared with the previous plays, there are fewer instances of the king as sacred, as in the following samples:

As of the King's rebellious enemies:
As underminers of his **sacred** state
(*Thomas of Woodstock*, II.i.34-35; from now on, *ToW*)

My royal lord, even by my birth I swear
My father's tomb, and faith to Heaven I owe,
Your uncle's thoughts are all most honourable,
And to that end the good Protector sends me
To certify your **sacred** majesty
The peers of England now are all assembled
To hold a parliament at Westminster
(*ToW*, II.i.143-49)

Although we could have easily surprised,
Dispersed and overthrown your rebel troops
That draw your swords against our **sacred** person,
The highest God's **anointed** deputy,
Breaking your holy oaths to Heaven and us
(*ToW*, 5V.iii.54-58)

Yield to your uncles. Who but they should have
The guidance of your **sacred** state and council?
(*ToW*, V.iii.86-87)

Here, therefore, we have four occurrences of sacred, but they are applied either to the state, or to the figure of his majesty, only once di-

rectly to the person of the King, by Richard himself. These are the only instances of the terms.

It appears quite clear that the idea of a sacred King is very much preserved in *Jack Straw* and in *Richard II*, much less so in *Thomas of Woodstock*. This last play depicts without hypocrisy a king unworthily striving to achieve absolute power, irritated by any form of limitation both from the peers and from Parliament, which he dismisses as soon as he claims the throne in II.ii. The old nobility goes back to the medieval idea that the power of the king should be limited, a concept dating back to the Magna Charta; the new court is seeking the new absolute power rising in Europe. This is a situation that begun with the Tudors, with Henry VIII in particular, but became more extreme under the Stuarts.

It is clear that people have a role here, and that stance is seen sympathetically by the author. In *Thomas of Woodstock* the commoners are oppressed by unfair taxation: Tresilian has devised the abominable blank charters, a sort of promissory note where the amount to be disbursed is arbitrarily decided by the king and his flatterers. "Wanton Richard" and the courtesans surrounding him are totally out of control. Yet, criticism is not voiced primarily by the commoners, but by the nobles. The most violent condemnation of King and Court comes from the uncles of the King. The people protest in two (very bland) ways: talking in general about the misfortunes of being poor and having to submit to unfair taxation, and in the form of satirical ballads; later on, appealing to ancient laws which supposedly granted certain rights, no matter what the King might wish to do.

The examples that follows are quite meaningful. In III.iii, there is the marketplace scene, where people from the village are faced with tax collectors distributing the blank charters.

COWTAIL

[...] I tell ye neighbour, I am more afraid of the bee than the bear: there's wax to be used today, and I have no seal about me. I may tell you in secret, here's a dangerous world towards. Neighbour, you're a farmer, and I hope here's none but God and good company. We live in such a state, I am e'en almost weary of all, I assure ye. Here's my other neighbour, the butcher that dwells at Hockley, has heard his landlord tell strange tidings. We shall be all hoisted and we tarry here, I can tell ye. [...]

FARMER

Ah, sirrah, and what said the good knight your landlord, neighbour?

BUTCHER

Marry, he said, but I'll not stand to anything, I tell ye that aforehand, he said that King Richard's new councillors (God amend them), had crept into honester men's places then themselves were; and that the King's uncles and the old lords, were all banished the court; and he said flatly we should never have a merry world as long as it was so.

(*ToW*, III.iii.48-73)

As it appears, the protest is hardly subversive, yet the people are threatened by Tresilian's men and they will be arrested and brought to court as "privy whisperers" (*ToW*, III.iii.150-51).

Another instance of protest well covered in the form of ballad is the Schoolmaster song:

Will ye buy any parchment knives?
 We sell for little gain:
 Whoe'er are weary of their lives
 They'll rid them of their pain.

Blank charters they are called
 A vengeance on the villain,
 I would he were both flayed and bald
 God bless my lord Tresilian.
 [...]
 A poison may be Greene,
 But Bushy can be no faggot:
 God mend the king and bless the queen,
 And 'tis no matter for Bagot.

For Scroop, he does no good;
 But if you'll know the villain,
 His name is now to be understood
 God bless my lord Tresilian.
 (*ToW*, III.iii.180-87, 196-203)

Even though the Schoolmaster feels quite safe from censorship as he has "covered [the verses] rarely" (*ToW*, III.iii.167-68) with the final mock-blessing, he is of course detained as well.

In IV.iii we find other people who protest against unfair accusations and incarceration: the sheriffs of Kent and Northumberland.

SHRIEVE OF KENT

My lord, I plead our ancient liberties
 Recorded and enrolled in the King's Crown Office,
 Wherein the Men of Kent are clear discharged
 Of fines, fifteens, or any other taxes,
 Forever given them by the Conqueror.
 (*ToW*, IV.iii.19-23)

SHRIEVE OF NORTHUMBERLAND

We are free born, my lord, yet do confess
 Our lives and goods are at the King's dispose;
 But how, my lord? – like to a gentle prince
 To take or borrow what we best may spare,
 And not like bondslaves, force it from our hands!

TRESILIAN

Presumptuous traitors, that we will try on you.
 Will you set limits to the King's high pleasure?
 Away to prison! Seize their goods and lands.

SHRIEVE OF KENT

Much good may it do ye, my lord. The care is ta'en:
 As good die there as here abroad be slain.

SHRIEVE OF NORTHUMBERLAND

Well, God forgive both you and us, my lord.
 Your hard oppressions have undone the state
 And made all England poor and desolate.
 (*ToW*, IV.iii.34-46)

Despite the dreadful treatment they are served for uttering a very respectful remonstrance against the new unfair taxes, the two sheriffs are sent to prison and their property is illegally taken by the Lord Chief Justice. Their final reaction is mild at the best. The people are outspoken, but remain respectful, law-abiding, and bland in their protests.

The aristocracy, on the other hand, are not so careful in expressing criticism towards the king. As mentioned above, it is they who voice the strongest denunciation of the King's wrongdoings.

WOODSTOCK

[...] Speak, speak, what tidings, Cheney?

CHENEY

Of war, my lord, and civil dissension.
 The men of Kent and Essex do rebel.

WOODSTOCK

I thought no less and always feared as much.

CHENEY

The shrieves in post have sent unto your grace
That order may be ta'en to stay the commons,
For fear rebellion rise in open arms.

WOODSTOCK

Now, headstrong Richard, shalt thou reap the fruit
Thy lewd licentious wilfulness hath sown.
I know not which way to bestow myself.

YORK

There is no standing on delay, my lords.
These hot eruptions must have some redress
Or else in time they'll grow incurable.

WOODSTOCK

The commons they rebel – and the King all careless.
Here's wrong on wrong to stir more mutiny.
Afore my God, I know not what to do.

LANCASTER

Take open arms, join with the vexed commons
And hale his minions from his wanton side.
Their heads cut off, the people's satisfied.

(*ToW*, I.iii.231-249)

It is therefore clear that in this text the noble uncles of the king decidedly side with the mutinous people to rid the court of the flatterers who influence the king. And the king is guilty as well as his minions.

WOODSTOCK

[...] Blank charters call ye them? If any age
Keep but a record of this policy,
(I phrase it too, too well) – flat, villainy! –
Let me be chronicled Apostata,
Rebellious to my God and country both.

LANCASTER

How do the people entertain these blanks?

CHENEY

With much dislike, yet some for fear have signed them,
Others there be refuse and murmur strangely.

WOODSTOCK

Afore my God I cannot blame them for it.
He might as well have sent defiance to them.
O vulture England, wilt thou eat thine own?
Can they be rebels called that now turn head?
I speak but what I fear, not what I wish.

This foul oppression will withdraw all duty
 And in the commons' hearts hot rancours breed
 To make our country's bosom shortly bleed.
 (*ToW*, III.ii.74-89)

Again, the rebellion is seen as understandable, reasonable, even justifiable: the king's behaviour has broken the social pact and obedience is no longer a virtue. In a later outbreak of desperation, Woodstock admits he has neither power nor arguments against the rising; he can only preach patience and forbearance.

It can be argued that the protest is voiced by the nobles in order to prevent any accusation to the people: the text takes the part of the wronged citizens but depicts them as harmless and meek; the old nobility, on the other hand, can freely speak of a righteous rebellion, distancing themselves from the deeds, which are formally condemned, but at the same time seen with understanding and a recognition of blamelessness. *Thomas of Woodstock* is therefore a masterpiece of indirect, transversal rebellion and criticism of a tyrannical king, able to save both the commons and the nobles from the accusation of treason, yet enabling the expression of dissent: "This day shall here determinate all wrongs. / The meanest man taxed by their foul oppressions / Shall be permitted freely to accuse, / And right they shall have to regain their own; / Or all shall sink to dark confusion" (*ToW*, V.iii.32-36).

The political stance expressed in the text has not gone unnoticed among scholars, who at various stages have recognised *Woodstock's* peculiar political strength.

Rossiter, for examples, writes:

There, as in his feeling for the common man, the author stands a little apart from his times. [...] [W]e should see our Anon standing somewhere between the quasi-medieval picture which backgrounds Shakespeare and the new world shaped for us by the later struggles of Parliament and King: the world of 1688, shall I say? (Rossiter 1946, 31)

And, further on,

the argument of *Woodstock* and its patterning of character-design give it a point which was, if nothing more, sharply conflicting with the political principles fully accepted by most dramatists, Shakespeare among them. To that

extent it is unorthodox, and its author an independent thinker – about History if no more (Rossiter 1946, 32).

Marie Axton considers *Woodstock* “unconventional and audacious” (Axton 1977, 97). Janet Stavropoulos admits that “[i]ts coherent plot and language facilitate the expression of its unorthodox political statement: subjects oppressed by tyrannical rule may understandably rebel against their king” (Stavropoulos 1988, 1).

MacDonald P. Jackson sees it as a mixture between “orthodoxy and subversiveness” (Jackson 2001, 45):

If ‘On the matters of civil war and obedience to the king, the author of *Woodstock* is ample, explicit, and scrupulously orthodox,’ while accepting ‘doctrine that a man must not obey the king to the danger of his mortal soul’ [...] Yet *Woodstock* boldly ‘highlights the grievances of the common people’ and ‘finds [...] much justification for rebellion led by the Council’. (Jackson 2001, 45-46)³

Margot Heinemann also considers *Woodstock* to be “in some ways the boldest and most subversive of all Elizabethan historical plays” (Heinemann 1991, 184).

Alzada Tipton claims that “the playwright establishes the commons as a significant force in political events and reminds any magistrates who may be watching the play to take them seriously” (Tipton 1998, 118), and elsewhere affirms:

If *Woodstock* is distinctive in its support for the commons as they act within the bounds of the law and in its condemnation of princes who ignore that law, the play is perhaps unique in its continued support for the commoners once they cross over the boundary of the law and into rebellion. In general, the play’s depiction of the commoners is surprisingly wholehearted in its defense of their right to rebel against an exploitative prince. (Tipton 1998, 125)

Melchiori too, back in 1979, claimed that “l’autore di *Woodstock* è su posizioni ideologiche che anticipano quelle che, meno di cinquant’ an-

³ Here Jackson is quoting from E. M. W. Tillyard 1944, and Margot Heinemann 1991, 184-85.

ni dopo, avrebbero provocato la rivoluzione borghese e la caduta della monarchia in Inghilterra" (Melchiori 1979, 8)⁴.

Woodstock can therefore be considered the boldest among the three plays considered here: the least concerned with the idea of a sacred king and more connected with the idea of contractual monarchy, and the most open, if not in depicting rebellious commoners, at least in taking the side of the wronged mutinous citizens.

4. Concluding remarks

If absolutism can be seen as a product of the war of the Roses and the ascent of the Tudors (Bezio 2015, 9), it can also be stated that the tendency towards absolutism produces a counter effect in the desire to rebel against a monarch who no longer observes his/her oath to govern within certain boundaries, together with his/her people (at various moments represented differently, culminating in the Parliament), and for the benefit of the common weal.

If during the Middle Ages it was argued that rebellion and even tyrannicide may be justified (see Bezio 2015, 8 and notes 27 and 28, quoting Nenner, Manegold of Lautenbach, John of Salisbury, Fortescue, Languet, Robert Person and Christopher Goodman), expressing political criticism or discontent in the Tudor or Stuart age could easily lead to accusations of treason and to a painful, excruciating death. And it is in this context that the three plays depicting medieval crisis and political unrest were written and staged. Thence, the need for balance between criticism of inadequate rule, poetic justice and the political ability to avoid censorship.

According to Sterling,

As the genre of the history play progresses, it becomes more politically subversive, for the dramas begin to question the sociopolitical hierarchy (of which the monarch is the apex) instead of reinforcing the social order. Richard Helgerson suggests 'a special relation between popular revolt and the theater. Clearly a significant portion of the Elizabethan theater audience liked seeing such plays, and ... the theater was a willing bearer of a

4 "The author of *Woodstock* shares ideological positions that foreshadow those which, fifty years later, would lead to the bourgeois revolution and the fall of the monarchy in England" (my translation).

radically subversive peasant, or more generally commoner, ideology. [...] Renaissance history plays become increasingly seditious politically' (Sterling 1996, IX-X).

It is noteworthy that, in the case of *Thomas of Woodstock*, neither the people's criticism nor the nobles' heavy criticism are censored. Other portions of the text are struck out by Sir George Buc, the Master of the Revels active at the time: the passage where King Richard himself admits to his being guilty (in the division of the kingdom), and the mention of Richard being "Superior Lord of Scotland", deemed unacceptable under James I. So after all what is struck out are the King's words, his own profession of guilt, and his admitted responsibility in his uncle's murder.

Authors constantly face the need to avoid censorship and navigate potentially disruptive issues with care to avoid trespassing. Having lower class villains proclaim clearly outrageous statements, and later having them punished, is a way of showing abidance to political orthodoxy and respect for political power. Displacement of criticism to the highest ranks of nobility and aristocracy is also a way of expressing unruly, riotous points of view shielding the author and his ideas from censorship.

To conclude, in comparison with the other two texts analysed so far, *Thomas of Woodstock* shows a more refined political criticism and a more deeply subversive attitude; therefore it can be considered a later text, with a more radical position in what concerns rebellion and criticism of power. In a hypothetical sequence of increasingly subversive positions, possibly confirming the latest dating of the texts, *Jack Straw* appears to be the most conservative, *Richard II* the most ambiguous in representing an inept king, yet keeping an orthodox position, and *Thomas of Woodstock* the latest one, already projected towards the Civil War which broke out only three decades later.

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REVIEWS

Selected Publications in Shakespeare Studies

Bigliuzzi, Silvia, ed., *Shakespeare and Crisis. One Hundred Years of Italian Narratives*, Amsterdam and Philadelphia, John Benjamins, 2020, 282 pp.

Ciliberto, Michele, *Shakespeare. Il male, il potere, la magia*, Incipit, Pisa, Edizioni della Normale, 2022, 256 pp.

“The time is out of joint”, Shakespeare’s Hamlet famously exclaims in I.v, “O cursed spite! / That ever I was born to set it right!” (189-90). Shocked by the horrific news of Claudius’ crime, Hamlet perceives the task that the ghost of his father has laid upon him – at the same time a private duty (to avenge the murder) and political obligation (to set his time right) – as both inevitable and intolerable. To act or not to act is his plight. Hamlet’s inner conflict was rooted in the religious, political, and cultural ‘earthquake’ that shook early modern Europe, leading to what Alessandro Serpieri aptly put as “the great structural and epistemological *crisis* that occurred between the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries, a *crisis* that can be summarized as the conflict between a symbolic model of the world (a classical-medieval-Renaissance heritage) and a syntagmatic one, inaugurating the relativism of the modern age” (1985, p. 125, emphasis mine).

‘Crisis’ is a revealing word. This term, although somewhat abused in contemporary discourse, carries a profound significance rooted in its Greek etymology, evoking the idea of a judgement, or a decision to be made at a particular point in time when conflicts arise to threaten “a given structure of relations” (Berghaus 1996, p. 44). The early modern age was undoubtedly one of such “particular point[s]

in time". No wonder then that an author such as Shakespeare would give voice to the manifold crises of his age. In this regard, recent contributions to Shakespearean Studies, such as Michele Ciliberto's *Shakespeare. Il male, il potere, la magia* (2022) and Silvia Bigliuzzi's *Shakespeare and Crisis. One Hundred Years of Italian Narratives* (2020), share a ground-breaking reflection on Shakespeare and 'crisis'. If the former aims at shedding light on the multifaceted ways in which Shakespeare responded to a phase of transition and conflict, the latter focuses on how the various translations, adaptations, and appropriations of Shakespeare have been exploited to respond to similar moments in more recent years.

In his *Shakespeare. Il male, il potere, la magia*, Michele Ciliberto discusses some of Shakespeare's major dramatic works from the early 17th century, and highlights the playwright's acknowledgement of the universal crisis already exploited by illustrious intellectuals of Italian Humanism, ranging from Leon Battista Alberti to Giordano Bruno, from Niccolò Machiavelli and Francesco Guicciardini to Pietro Pomponazzi and Tommaso Campanella. All of them, as recently pinpointed in Massimo Cacciari's *La mente inquieta* (2019), were far from being enthusiastic supporters of the Neoplatonic celebration of anthropocentrism. In fact, living through the religious and political turmoil that characterised early modern Europe, they highlighted the servile and beastly nature of men and women, mere 'toys' in the hands of gods, and subject to a destiny which, in most cases, escaped their control. According to Ciliberto, it is on this 'tragic' ground that Shakespeare engaged with these agents of the Italian Renaissance culture: "Quello che accomuna Shakespeare ai grandi esponenti dell'Umanesimo italiano è la persuasione di vivere un'epoca di crisi del mondo, nella quale [...] è venuto meno ogni principio di ordine, di gerarchia e di responsabilità individuale, e con essi tutti i vincoli di ordine etico e anche religioso [...]" (p. 26). [Shakespeare shares with the great protagonists of Italian Humanism the conviction of living in a time of world crisis, wherein [...] every principle of order, hierarchy, and individual responsibility has dissolved, along with all ethical and even religious bonds"].

In eight chapters Ciliberto's volume focuses on a cluster of concepts crucial to the above-mentioned Italian humanists, and highlights Shakespeare's engagement with the same ideas in plays as di-

verse as *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *Macbeth*, *King Lear*, or *The Tempest*. Besides the three topics featured in the title – “evil”, “power”, and “magic” – Ciliberto touches upon seminal topics as “justice”, “memory”, “revenge”, or “*ludus deorum*”, among others. In so doing, he considers the universal crisis endorsed by the humanists of Quattrocento and Cinquecento Italy from a variety of points of view; a crisis that Shakespeare seems to have handled, somewhat directly, and then refashioned, more or less explicitly.

An exploration of Shakespeare in the light of the six eminent Italians who constitute the core of Ciliberto’s research interests is indeed among the merits of the volume, which confirms the fruitful circulation of ideas between Italy and England in the Renaissance. While the presence of Machiavelli and Bruno in early modern English culture has been variously investigated in several contexts, *Shakespeare. Il male, il potere, la magia* offers a novel perspective and invites readers to approach Anglo-Italian relations with fresh eyes. However, there is much yet to uncover when it comes to authors such as Campanella or Pomponazzi, suggesting that a more in-depth analysis of their ideas may contribute to broadening our understanding of the English poets and playwrights that addressed the same issues. In this regard, the attention that Ciliberto pays to Leon Battista Alberti is particularly relevant, revealing the resonance of his ideas in *Hamlet* (Chapter 1) and *Othello* (Chapter 2). For instance, in Hamlet’s poignant speech in II.ii, where he celebrates “man” as a “piece of work” (305), only to conclude that he is nothing but “quintessence of dust” (310), Ciliberto detects Alberti’s doubts on the fact that the creature he had defined in Book II of his *Theogenius* as “umbra d’un sogno” (Alberti 1966, p. 89) and considered subject to “perpetua servitù” (p. 90) could indeed represent the centre of the cosmos. Moreover, in his discussion of *Othello*, Ciliberto puts forward evidence of the similarities between Iago and Alberti’s Momus. He argues that both characters believe they have suffered some injustice and therefore use similar forms of ‘chameleonic’ dissimulation to seek revenge, although ultimately to no avail, and in ways that rather confirm the meaninglessness of the world in which they live: “La dimensione camaleontica si manifesta nell’uno e nell’altro come capacità di mascherarsi per ottenere vendetta: motivo [...] presente anche nell’ultimo capitolo del *Momus*, nel quale

diventa chiara l'ontologia alla base del discorso di Alberti, e il confluire di essa, come quella di Shakespeare, nella morte, nel nulla" (p. 68). ["This chameleonic dimension reveals itself in both characters as the ability to disguise oneself in order to seek revenge, a motif also resonating in the final chapter of *Momus*, where Alberti's underlying ontology emerges from and merges with Shakespeare's perspective on the themes of death and nothingness"].

While underlining how this 'sense' of a universal crisis is dealt with by the Italian humanists and Shakespeare along similar lines, Ciliberto also highlights one significant difference. The humanist idea that crises can be overcome by means of well-targeted actions, implying moral and political reforms ("la funzione salvifica della prassi" "the salvific function of praxis"; p. 15), seems absent from Shakespeare's tragedies. It is only in his romances, such as *The Winter's Tale* and, most of all, *The Tempest*, Ciliberto argues, that an alternative perspective is envisaged. In these plays, what Shakespeare presents is a highly peculiar kind of *praxis*, one that requires the acceptance of a 'leap of faith' on the part of his audience. It is indeed the recourse to magic that glimpses the exceptional possibility to enter a parallel universe, a dream-like world, in which humankind can eventually enjoy their life and try to be happy... until magic lasts. Of course, this cannot but be a temporary situation: "La magia è una *chance*, per una volta, non per sempre [...]" (p. 188) ["Magic is a chance, for once, not forever"]. The truth is – Ciliberto concludes – that in Shakespeare's plays both the real world and the fundamentally tragic destiny of humankind are impossible to escape.

In the light of Shakespeare's influence on European culture at large, it is no surprise that his engagement in the theme of crisis both at individual and collective levels ended up providing other countries with useful narrative threads. Focusing on the Italian context between 1916 and 2016, Shakespeare's third and fourth centenary of his death respectively, Bigliuzzi's *Shakespeare and Crisis. One Hundred Years of Italian Narratives* explores "the cultural discourses that, through Shakespeare, supplied responses to periods of cultural and political crisis in the course of a century, and [...] how those narrative events were forged, used, and endowed with cultural and political agency" (p. 2). Bigliuzzi and the other contributors to this intelligent collection of essays approach such narratives from a variety of crit-

ical standpoints, which allow them to show the multifaceted commitment to Shakespeare by people as diverse as writers, directors, intellectuals, and critics, as well as the relevance of his work during critical moments in Italian history.

The seven chapters of this book are organised chronologically, tracing how Shakespeare either provided or joined different types of discourse at times of crisis for Italy, including the aftermath of World War One and the multi-level crises of the 1970s and the first decades of the 21st century. Significantly titled “Identity crises”, Part 1 is made up of three chapters investigating the reasons why Shakespeare was both included in and excluded from Italian public debates on his 1916 Tercentenary and especially during the years of Mussolini’s Fascist regime, with analyses considering the propagandistic uses of *Julius Caesar*. If Shakespeare’s Tercentenary, which followed Italy’s controversial entry into WW1, occurred at a time of fierce opposition between nationalist and internationalist factions that contributed to Italy’s apparent “forgetfulness” (p. 29) of the event, the ways in which Shakespeare was later absorbed into Fascist propaganda demonstrates instead that Mussolini and his *entourage* capitalised on Shakespeare’s work when it suited them, turning his Julius Caesar, for example, into “the champion of nationalist law-and-order Caesarism in a State of exception requiring the rule of the strong man” (p. 139). Right before the invasion of Ethiopia, two events such as the productions of *Julius Caesar* at the Basilica of Maxentius (1935) and Gian Francesco Malipiero’s opera drawn from the same play (1936) did indeed prove, as Bigliuzzi argues, “how the Fascist regime, in the short span of time between 1 August 1935 and 7 February 1936, could use Shakespeare to pave the way towards the Empire and, once proclaimed, provide its apologia” (p. 139).

Part 2 (“Power games and the crisis of history”) leads readers to the 1970s, the so-called ‘Anni di Piombo’ [leaden years], and examines how Italian adaptations of Shakespeare’s plays in those years became a means for a new generation of directors and actors to confront the anxieties originated in their country’s troubled past, as well as to reflect on what was perceived as a crisis of the very category of history. Such crucial issues are tackled through fresh insights into Giorgio Strehler’s and Carmelo Bene’s engagement with Shakespeare. As Lucia Nigri explains in Chapter 4, the encounter

with Shakespeare offered Strehler the possibility to answer “his own painful questions about the recent past as well as the contemporary generational crisis” (p. 165), and to make sense, albeit pessimistically, of “the narrative of the game of the powerful as a circle in history that man could not escape” (p. 166). In Chapter 5, Bigliuzzi instead underscores how Carmelo Bene’s ‘minoritising’ (sic) approach to Shakespeare’s *Richard III*, by means of subversive alterations of the seduction scene and prosthetic transformations, not only allowed him to “evade [the] allegories of authoritarian power” which were common at the time, but also to probe “into the nature of political action as seduction, displaying the falsity of official history as opposed to lived history” (p. 177).

The last section of the volume analyses how Shakespeare provided material to inquire into the crisis of representation, entailing a crisis of the subject, which characterised the period comprised between the 1980s and 2016. In this regard, Bigliuzzi’s Chapter 6 explores various uses of Shakespeare, by considering “strategies of intermedial appropriation as critiques of a culture of simulacra” as well as “allegorical forms of ‘hyperreal’ adaptations that by recuperating ideas of ‘transparent representation’ sidestep preoccupations about the hyperreal” (p. 216). Finally, Maria Elisa Montironi’s Chapter 7 shows how Shakespeare has often been used to thematise the manifold crises plaguing contemporary Italy, including issues of political and social identity against the backdrop of migratory phenomena and the new generations’ disenchantment with history and politics. At the same time, in this context of socio-political discontent, Montironi concludes on a more positive note in reminding readers that Shakespeare has nonetheless become a precious ‘cultural capital’; “a powerful marketing tool”, as she writes, which has helped several Italian companies “to cope with the ongoing economic and also cultural crisis” (p. 249).

In their exploration of how ideas of crisis have been interpreted by and through Shakespeare, Ciliberto’s and Bigliuzzi’s scholarly contributions set themselves at the crossroads between European Shakespeare Studies and studies of Shakespeare and Italy. These areas of research have witnessed a significant growth over the years by providing evidence of the “[profitable] exchange”, to put it in Enza De Francisci and Chris Stamatakis’ words, “between languages and

literary cultures" (2017, p. 2), which is to be understood "in the sense of both a reciprocal transaction (a mercantile trade, an exchange *between* equivalents) and a displacement (a substitution, an exchange of one thing *for* another)" (p. 3, emphasis in the original). Building on this wide-ranging wealth of scholarship, both books reviewed here are welcome additions to our understanding of Shakespeare and his legacy. Particularly, they offer insights into the ways in which the uncertainty as well as the necessity to make decisions when 'crisis' is the issue permeate Shakespeare's works, together with the 'Shakespearean discourses' subsequently developed in the context of specific critical moments.

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Boitani, Piero, *In cerca di Amleto*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2022, 180 pp.

The book by Piero Boitani emerges as an almost unattainable dream, a question that already implies a negative answer, yet it preserves its allure: is it possible to “grasp Hamlet and hold him firm in one’s hands” (p. 13)? All the characters in *Hamlet*, with the possible exception of Horatio, attempt to seize the elusive prince using various means, compelling him to respond with defiance to those trying to pluck out the heart of his mystery. Despite the seemingly programmatic impossibility of fulfilling this desire, Boitani, with his characteristic blend of intellectual acumen and the pleasure of writing, deeply explores some ways for capturing at least the textual specter of Hamlet.

“In Search of Hamlet” is structured as a dialogue between two ostensibly distinct parts: “In Search of Hamlet with the Greats”, where the great readers of this work from the past succeed one another in showing how the very elusiveness of the Prince forces us to embrace, if not Hamlet himself, the allure of this endless escape; and “In Search of Hamlet with Hamlet”, where Boitani, inspired by the return of these shadows from the past, re-examines the most mysterious and elusive knots of the tragedy. It concludes with an appendix, a brief essay by Pietro Citati titled “The Angels of Hamlet”, where the numerous real and fictional ghosts that haunt the work are contrasted with the authentic voice of the heart.

The two components of the book are two complementary fields: the first part is a look at Hamlet and its interpretation, “a survey [...] of the most creative philosophical and exegetical peaks” (p. 16), while the second is a scene-by-scene analysis that focuses mainly on those excessive elements that are not strictly necessary for the plot, or on the “ ‘gaps’ that the play’s plot does not bother to fill” (p. 16). A survey that observes how many eagles have attempted to look at this literary peak, followed by an apparent denial of the very possibility of fully reading this work, showing the interruptions due at times to gaps, at others to excesses, an irregular contrivance that inexplicably continues to function. The union of the two parts is the (in its own way Hamletian) faith that Hamlet can be, if not grasped, at least embraced for a moment, when it is observed both when it works too well (allowing other authors to see in it a reflection of their own ar-

tistic theory and sometimes of their own selves) and when it seems not to work at all (amidst the verbose or lacunary folds of the text).

Boitani plays, in his own inimitable way, with the apparent impossibility of the task. In fact, the more it appears to be a mission impossible, the greater the fascination of the results. Significantly, Boitani quotes a passage of the *Poetics* where Aristotle almost seems to anticipate the plot of *Hamlet* as an example of a dramatic situation that cannot function, lacking the final resolution of every good tragedy: a “structural flaw”, Boitani observes, since for Aristotle the worst of all dramatic cases is “to ponder while knowing, but then not to act”; to present, that is, “a detestable situation, and not a tragic one, because there is no catastrophe” (p. 49). The negation of the Aristotelian passage is so complete that, if it were not for the fact that the *Poetics* was not translated in Shakespearean times, one would almost interpret *Hamlet* as a deliberate challenge to such authority. With a profusion of interlocked examples of the never-ending dialogue between Shakespeare and the great authors and readers of the past, Boitani rightly observes that it is a deliberate form of incompleteness. The task of grasping *Hamlet* is itself an Hamletian, indecisive, unsolvable task: however, knowing that one reasons within a framework of deliberate incompleteness (of revenge, language, action, deliberation) paradoxically allows for a complete view of this imperfection. As Frank Kermode explains in *The Genesis of Secrecy*, it is precisely the awareness that there are voids and excesses in the original narrative that need to be filled or explained, which motivates the impossible completion by rewriters and interpreters.

The common thread of the first part is reflection, another effect of the immense, infinite self-reflexivity that characterises this play. *Hamlet* is the guiding deity of countless other literary geniuses, from Romanticism to T. S. Eliot, in a sort of eternal return that, as Borges notes, continually resurrects *Hamlet*. A sign of this reflexivity is the constant recurrence in the text of images of shadow, mirror, ghost, and double. Several great readers, especially the Romantics, find in *Hamlet* themselves, or what they think they are or would like to be. It is *Hamlet* who brings out the theatrical vocation of Wilhelm Meister, allowing Goethe to synthesise the effect that Shakespeare has in perhaps the most beautiful page ever written about the Bard. The weakness of *Hamlet*'s will, which often never achieves its effect and at

the same time follows oblique paths forced by necessity, similarly strikes August Wilhelm Schlegel; in *Hamlet*, the Romantics, especially Coleridge, starting from Samuel Johnson's intuition as an opera with an unsafe conduct, find the idea of a character who gets lost in an enigmatic and irresolvable labyrinth of thoughts. The reflections also turn to other classics, such as the tragedy of Orestes, with which Hegel finds a difference, the change of the ethos of revenge, which has become an infamous crime. The reflection also concerns an entire nation, as shown by the well-known phrase of a Dostoevskyan character, according to which the other nations have their Hamlets, while Russia must be content only with the Karamazovs so far (the Russian sensitivity towards *Hamlet* is particularly evident, from Pasternak's appreciation of the drama of duty and self-oblivion, to the reflections coming from other characters, notably Ophelia, re-read in her feminine fragility by Akhmatova and Tsvetaeva). *Hamlet* becomes even transnational, representing Europe for Valéry.

This reflection captures the modern condition of doubt: as Turgeniev admirably observes, the denial of *Hamlet* puts the good in doubt, but does not doubt evil, and engages in a relentless struggle with it. We thus arrive at the edge of the twentieth century, where the events of *Hamlet* seem to represent, according to Nietzsche, how knowledge kills action, and how action requires being enveloped in illusion, another incarnation of the Dionysian man who has known the true essence of things and feels nausea in the face of acting. *Hamlet* becomes for Freud the most perfect incarnation of this impossibility, if not of acting in general, of accomplishing the only action that would make sense in the world of the father, revenge, repressed by inhibition. A doubt that, in Greenblatt's suggestive re-reading, also derives from the eclipse of the ancient purgatorial and Catholic system and the reflection, so to speak, between this visible world and the true invisible world.

A sense of reflection is also present in the negative, when writers hasten to profess their Freudianly suspect denial of any resemblance. We see it in the noted negative sentence of T.S. Eliot, who brands *Hamlet* as a failure because it does not fit with his theory of the objective correlative, proof of the foundational power of the work for every theoretical system, or in Tolstoy's irresistible aversion to that work marked by exaggeration in actions and characters, and by the

lack of character for its protagonist. There is “something structurally and historically, ideally disturbing in the tragedy of Hamlet” (p. 49), Boitani observes, that allows this excess of theory and inspiration instead of paralysing it, almost reproducing the excess of thought that the impossibility of action, and the consciousness that distinguishes between good and evil, causes in the work itself. As a keen reader like Lev Semenovich Vygotsky observes, the tragedy moves in the unexplored, carefully demarcating the invisible boundary that divides the world of visible action from that other world in which everything is decided. Error as a creative phase, therefore, error as a portal of discovery, as Joyce says.

The second part (“In cerca di Amleto con l’Amleto”), focusing on the structure of the work, questions precisely where these reflections seem to jam, where thought becomes obsessive and duplicates itself. Between thought and action, a very long interim has been inserted, which is entirely occupied by Hamlet: “the interim is mine” (*Hamlet*, V.ii.73). The second part focuses on the many excesses, which are another form of reflection, this time within the text. Precisely because Hamlet, as interpreted by Bloom, is a character who creates himself by speaking and listening to himself, unfathomable depths result. Boitani ingeniously and with the joint pleasure of acumen and eloquence (a vicarious pleasure that his readers experience) probes into the excess of precision that characterises “To be or not to be”, the excess of duplications of characters, scene, lines, and themes, as if the imperfect world required this duplication to be filled. If Hamlet is a “drama that tends toward totality” (p. 100), Boitani explores how this totality is intuited precisely thanks to imperfection, which arises from the lack of a conclusion, an end, a purpose: “Hamlet knows and believes in the Beginning, but seems to know nothing of the end” (p. 114). From this failure, a “new awareness” follows, “the acceptance of what is and what will be”, a secular “providential plan” (p. 130).

Thus, in the end, we return to the imperfect transcendence of perhaps the most colossal human work ever conceived, an almost divine game of observation in which we can see our reflections: “I believe that Shakespeare intended with Hamlet to stage the representation of the infinite possibilities that life and the fate of man unfold and then close or leave suspended: the play of chance and necessity, of thought and paralysis in which it forces action, of the transformations that man un-

dergoes in living" (p. 132). For our and his good fortune, we will continue to be unable to embrace Hamlet, aware that the action to be taken is precisely this seemingly impossible task: "sketching the boundaries of the soul" (p. 137) – Hamlet's and our own, if they can be told apart.

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Sokolova, Boika and Valls-Russell, Janice, eds, *Shakespeare's Others in 21st-century European Performance: The Merchant of Venice and Othello*, The Arden Shakespeare, London, Bloomsbury, 2022, xii+395pp.

Shakespeare's Others in 21st-century European Performance, a collection of essays edited by Boika Sokolova and Janice Valls-Russell, delves deeply into the adaptations of *The Merchant of Venice* and *Othello*, showcasing how the staging of these plays is intricately entwined with Europe's colonial, anti-Semitic, and racist history. This anthology confronts the tumultuous societal landscape in the 21st century marked by nationalisms, migrations, racial violence, and various forms of oppression through nuanced exploration of stagings of *Othello* and *Shylock*. However, as the volume demonstrates, there are many 'others' in these plays, and they have different ethical, racial, gendered and cultural features across Bulgaria, Romania, Italy, Hungary, France, the Netherlands, Serbia, Germany, France, Portugal and Poland.

Originating from papers presented at The European Shakespeare Research Association (ESRA) in 2017, this collection's purpose and form are born from a need to respond to historical crises, offering insightful considerations about how Shakespeare can be a tool for identifying and/or dismantling persistent racism across various societal fronts. Aligned with the Global Inverted Series of The Arden Shakespeare, this publication endeavors to revise conventional notions of centre and periphery, challenging biased geographical perspectives in relation to Shakespeare's works. It particularly focuses on the manifestations of 'others' within the context of *Othello* and *The Merchant of Venice*, delving into the essential question: 'other to what'?

From the vantage point of Europe's long colonial history, the collection sheds light on the challenge of defining the centre to which

'others' are relegated. It brings attention to the ambiguity surrounding the restructured dichotomy between the 'other' and what is perceived as the centre, with a pointed question about whether European culture still constitutes this centre. Within the context of Global Shakespeare studies, pondering the shifts in power dynamics and violence within this discourse, these essays carefully navigate the ethical considerations in adapting Shakespeare's works, emphasising the need for a decolonising approach. At its core, the anthology serves as a testament to the prevalent themes of violence, fear, and aversion towards the Other in European discourse. It scrutinises the essence of identity, actions, and values when confronted with the unfamiliar, the stranger, and the outsider, contemplating the pervasive European practice of *othering*, and prompting reflection on the role and responsibilities of theatres in confronting these issues. It probes the contours of 21st-century European performance trends and the very definition of 'European', while rejecting a simplistic 'black' versus 'white' racial oppression narrative by highlighting the multifaceted forms of violence in a continent that should not be confined to a binary racial paradigm. Moreover, the volume seeks to reposition Shakespeare within European theatre, using his works as cultural capital to reflect the struggle of European societies with their civilised self-image. It prompts critical engagement with the challenges of living alongside 'Strangers' and navigating the often invisible line between civilised and uncivilised behaviour.

The volume takes a dual perspective: while considering audience response, performance analysis and critical reception of productions in their cultural contexts, it focuses on political issues. The collection's balanced selection of essays offers diverse portrayals of Shakespeare's *others*, with the first part focussing on 'relocating' otherness, and the second part exploring instances when productions failed to address the vulnerability of the Other or where the cultural capital of Shakespeare seems to be exploited. The book's structure, encircled by Lawrence Guntner's introductions to the three parts, contains essays, interviews, and a reflective coda. The use of ethical frameworks by thinkers such as Levinas, Todorov, and Maffesoli offers a rich philosophical basis for examining 'otherness', the ways society treats the 'other', and restoring a sense of 'civilisation' by accepting the humanity of others. While the volume does not explicitly question if

some productions perpetuate symbolic violence, it emphasises the importance of acknowledging and respecting 'otherness' in its own right, rather than merely defining it in contrast to something else.

However, the cover design raises a question. The image of a human being embracing multiple paper dolls serves as a metaphor, possibly indicating the complexities of embracing the multifaceted 'otherness' of another human.

Facing the other in 21st-century European productions of Othello and The Merchant of Venice

The first part of the book opens with Anna Maria Cimitile's essay, *Venice' is elsewhere: The Stranger's locality, or Italian 'blackness' in twenty-first-century stagings of 'Othello'*. Cimitile explores how the residual subaltern vision of Southern Italy becomes a principle of 'othering', using dialect in representing Othello, whether Neapolitan or Sicilian, as a perpetual stranger. She examines two Italian productions that resist cultural homogenisation through linguistic diversity, while addressing issues of femicide and the local *versus* global dynamics within Italian culture.

In *Refracting the racial Other into the Other-within in two Bulgarian adaptations of 'Othello'*, Sokolova and Stavreva analyse two intriguing productions. Liliya Abadjieva's 2005 all-male cast performance delves into strong physical theatre, emphasising toxic masculinity contrasted with an erased and victimised femininity. Ivan Mladenov's 2008 documentary, set in a prison, loosely adopts *Othello's* characters, embodied by individuals serving sentences for lesser crimes compared to the political elite of Bulgaria's post-communist transition. These narratives offer powerful insights into human stories, highlighted by cinematic storytelling. The essay introduces two critical ideological frameworks within the collection: the recognition of humanity in individuals deemed *barbarians* by seemingly civilised society, and the complexities of recognising the humanity of the 'Other' amid economic, political, and cultural identity crises of post-communism. However, it seems to overlook the *barbarity* perpetuated by capitalism, structurally sustaining adverse conditions for individuals.

Another significant exploration of Shakespeare's work is found in Polish theatre, renowned for its bold reinterpretations of classic texts.

Aleksandra Sakowska's essay, *Estranged strangers: Krzysztof Warlikowski's Shylock and Othello in 'African Tales after Shakespeare' (2011)*, encapsulates Warlikowski's aesthetically and politically daring approach. The analysis highlights his incorporation of theatrical collage and intermediality, creating a fragmented spectator experience. Warlikowski's focus appears to revolve around the impossibility of completely embodying the identity of the Other. He aims to connect with his spectators, whom he perceives as *desensitised individuals*:

My aim is to wake them [the audience] up from a nap, and sensitize them anew. I do not know if this is a provocation, maybe just [a way of] loosening up, arousing, activating and raising awareness. *The Merchant of Venice* is familiar [...] Shakespeare is familiar. [...] I want to say [to the audience] that they are much mistaken. (p. 28)

In Zorica Bečanović Nikolić's analysis, *Drags, dyes and death in Venice: 'The Merchant of Venice' (2004) and 'Othello' (2012) in Belgrade, Serbia*, Serbian productions are explored as opportunities for audiences to empathise with and understand the pain of the Other. The discussion offers hermeneutical considerations, shedding light on the subjective experience of being the Other and the various possibilities of engaging with them. It delves into the disillusionment with political systems within Balkan and post-Yugoslav societies, where individuals from various backgrounds find themselves labelled as the 'Other', both among themselves and from a more western European perspective. The essay suggests that both productions demonstrate a need for an integration of European values, revealing the complexities of racism towards non-European 'Others' and the pursuit to adopt European identity, both potentially being profoundly violent and (self) destructive processes.

In *'The Merchant of Venice' in France (2001 and 2017): Deconstructing a malaise* by Janice Valls-Russell, the focus is on the perpetuation of archaic anti-Semitism and the exploration of themes relating to neotribalism and the relationship with 'otherness' seen through the lens of Maffesoli and Levinas. The essay delves deeper into the post-Holocaust ethical debate on staging *The Merchant of Venice* and explores broader forms of 'othering' and the complexities of French society's crisis, examining Andrei Șerban's production *Étrangers en France* (2001) and Jacques Vincey's production *Business in Venice*

(2017). Şerban's production accentuates the erasure of individuality through stereotypical representation, hinting that anyone in the audience members, could embody these stereotypes. Vincey's work, in particular, focuses on the creation of the 'Other', portraying how anti-Semitism results in perpetuation of hatred. The essay concludes with a symptomatic metatheatrical moment in the 2017 production, where the audience is subtly accused of acting in ways stereotypically associated with Jews. Overall, Valls-Russell concludes that the productions confront the unanswered questions that often remain unanswerable in their complex and multi-layered nature.

In the second part of the volume, titled *New nationalisms, migrants: Imperfect resolutions*, the papers share a common sentiment of missed opportunities to grapple with the question of the 'Other', both on and off the stage. Nicoleta Cinpoş's essay, 'Barbarous temper', 'hideous violence' and 'mountainish inhumanity': Stage encounters with *The Merchant of Venice* in Romania, navigates the issues of Romanian identity within the European context. It touches upon xenophobia, homophobia, and gender-based racism, amidst the backdrop of rising nationalisms and conflicts between Romanians and Hungarians. The discussion reflects the coexistence of democratic enthusiasm with extremism and intolerance, as depicted in Laszlo Bocsárdi's 2010 production of *The Merchant of Venice*.

Natália Pikli's study on *Staging The Merchant of Venice in Hungary* notes the avoidance of complicated themes and responsibilities in Hungarian productions, particularly concerning the country's involvement in the Holocaust. The rise of intolerant attitudes influenced directorial choices, making even the 'Others' within the narratives intolerant. Bagó's rendition of *The Merchant of Venice* in Hungary is highlighted as a theatrical performance that, while commendable, somewhat diluted potentially contentious issues about Jews and anti-Semitism. The essay touches upon the need for a more significant and visible presence of the Stranger on stage, criticising the superficial approach and colonial undertones in these productions, and asserting the need for deeper engagement with the Other.

Dutch negotiations with otherness in times of crisis: Othello (2006) and The Arab of Amsterdam (2008), by Coen Heijes, scrutinises these performances' reluctance to confront Dutch colonial past, institutionalised racism, and societal hostilities between Muslims and Jews. The

analysis criticises the tendency to make generalised and banal statements, hiding behind a facade of universal pain and vulnerability, equating the *other* with everybody. While reflecting on the limitations of these contemporary Shakespeare performances in addressing societal and political issues, the essay observes that *Othello* (2006) largely adheres to the status quo, failing to enact significant change. Additionally, it contrasts this approach with *The Arab of Amsterdam*'s more direct and confrontational one in portraying the position of Muslim immigrants, asking to what extent Shakespeare can effectively convey the complexities of tumultuous societal moments and engage in contemporary discourse.

Francesca Rayner's exploration, *'Were I the Moor, I would not be Iago': Radical empathy in two Portuguese performances of 'Othello'*, inspects the deployment of empathy in the performances, emphasising the complexity and nuances that power dynamics introduce into the concept of empathy. It also criticises the productions' failure to challenge gender and racial stereotypes, pointing out how they refrained from unsettling societal expectations in their rendition of Shakespeare at national theatres. Lulling strategies of individual identifications could be overturned by a radical empathy based on collective struggles for equality and justice. In the performance of these Shakespeare plays, Rayner suggests that radical empathy could be a strategy of disidentification with stereotypes (both racial and gender) in order for an "artistic political transformation" (p. 193) to occur.

In *A tragedy? Othello and The Merchant of Venice in Germany during the 2015–16 refugee crisis* Bettina Boecker dissects the theatrical capacity to engage with societal and political relevance. It examines the cultural and societal responses during the refugee crisis of 2015–2016 in Germany, especially the 'culture of welcome'. The essay questions whether Christian Weise's *Othello*, directed for the Maxim Gorki Theater in Berlin, and Nicolas Stemann's *Merchant of Venice* at the Munich Kammerspiele indeed address or exploit the themes of otherness they ostensibly tackle. Her conclusion is that both productions other everyone, just in different ways. While Weise's *Othello* moves to the centre from the periphery, while all others are othered, Stemann completely disavows the idea of a centre identical with 'us', doing away with all reference points to even construct the other.

However, maybe the most important and crucial problem when it comes to European productions is the following:

[...] On the one hand, these colleagues curry favour with the *Zeitgeist*; on the other, they ignore the actual tasks of the theatre. Behind all of this is a big lie. Nobody is being helped – everyone is only pretending. And then the theatres fall in love with these social projects, which are nothing but vain posturing. [...] This is the way for theatre to abolish itself. [...] Theatre must remember its archetypical task. It must remember text, ensemble, the art of acting. ('Michael Thalheimer über Anbiederung, Posen und Gegenwartsdramatik' [Michael Thalheimer on currying favour with the public, posing and today's theatre], interview by Martin Eich, Wiesbadener Kurier, 28 November 2015; np; quoted in p. 222)

It seems that Thalheimer's provocative and direct comment is a much needed reflective point and a question one should have in mind before choosing to stage Shakespeare today. *Performative propositions*, a collection of conversations with directors Karin Coonrod, Arnaud Churin and Plamen Markov discusses their different theatrical practices and styles, comments on their inspiring readings and stagings of *Othello* and *The Merchant of Venice*. All these directors urge the need for hospitality, while also warning not to reduce Shakespeare's text to topics of racism and issues of othering. Nevertheless, this volume encapsulates the urgency and relevance of reevaluating Shakespeare's others within the context of contemporary crises, in Europe and beyond. Today's catastrophes are on a larger scale than they were in the time of conceiving the papers for the ESRA conference, and I would stress the need for a more daring, intellectually robust, and ethically provocative engagement with Shakespeare's others on European stages. Without a bold engagement, there is a risk of Shakespeare's legacy becoming complicit in problematic power dynamics or detached from the pressing issues of our time.

Additionally, the dangerous 'business as usual' attitude prevails in some theatres, as noted by Heijes. It is a feature of many institutions, academic environments and cultural venues that is desensitising us from ourselves and others, subsequently. More than ever, Edward Said's credo that the responsibility of an intellectual to *speak truth to power* resonates with issues raised in this volume, highlighting the necessity for introspection and a departure from conventional

practices, urging a move away from solely relying on Shakespeare as a cultural capital or a universal language. As expressed in Péter Dávidházi's *Coda: Staging Shakespeare's Others and their biblical archetype*, the hostile othering is not only a *tertium comparationis* for main characteristic of the analysed stagings, but also a biblical archetype of Western civilisation. In civilisational crisis, the other is needed and violated as a scapegoat to resolve it. In light of these archaic mechanisms, Dávidházi warns about how we collectively "cannot afford to alienate the Other much longer" (p. 277).

Shakespeare's Others in 21st-century European Performance urges us towards a more involved, relevant, and ethical dialogue with Shakespeare that remains attuned to the socio-political realities of our world. Otherwise, why stage Shakespeare at all? One would only be *othering* it from one of the main essences of theatre – to be relevant in present time.

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Squeo, Alessandra, *Print and Digital Remediations of the Shakespearean Text: A Hermeneutics of Reading from the First Folio to the Web*, Pisa, Edizioni ETS, 2022, 350 pp.

The publication of this useful and thorough study is well timed, coinciding closely with the quatercentenary celebration of the publication of Shakespeare's First Folio in 1623. Once a treasure seen by only a few privileged scholars, the fact that copies of this iconic publication can now be viewed in high quality facsimiles on many websites points to the value of a study that outlines and examines the changing forms, fashions, and multimedia representations of Shakespeare's work. Alessandra Squeo opens with a witty exploration of Shakespeare as a multimedia experience. In the first of many examples of insightful close readings, she examines the way that Peter Greenaway's film *Prospero's Books* inventively juxtaposes the media of film, of books, especially the First Folio, and of the visual representation of text. Turning to a very different medium, she deconstructs an irreverent poster, created for a recent conference, that features an image of Shakespeare triumphantly breaking free of the bondage of the book. The title Squeo has chosen immediately makes clear that this is a book for

the specialist. It is divided into two sections; the first chapters analyse “how different material forms of textual transmission affect the reader’s understanding of the playwright’s words” (p. 19), the second section, after “the digital turn” (p. 24), looks at Shakespeare on the Web and at other digital applications that enable exploration of the linguistic and social contexts of his work.

The discussion of Shakespeare in print covers familiar ground, but the study is made worthwhile through its comprehensive range and meticulous documentation. This section examines the materiality and evolving technology of the printed text and documents the changing attitudes and ideologies that have influenced the long tradition of editors: the cheerful confidence of Pope’s willingness to improve Shakespeare, the accumulating depth of annotation in the nineteenth century, the aspiration of the New Bibliographers to apply what they considered to be rigorous scientific principles to the process of editing, and something close to the rejection of the editorial process itself in the late twentieth century in the concept of “unedited” Shakespeare. Squeo is keenly aware of recent studies that explore the various ways that social and historical contexts have influenced the assumptions editors of Shakespeare have brought to their editions, shaping their values of interpretation; throughout she maintains a “main focus on the hermeneutics of reading” (p. 19). Appropriately, her concept of “reading” includes the impact on its audiences of media other than those based on print: the stage, film, and the history of interpreting the plays through extensive print illustrations.

It is a strength of Squeo’s study that she highlights the positive contributions over time that editors have made to the study of Shakespeare, notably defending the overall achievements of the New Bibliographers in “foregrounding the pre-eminent role of the printed book as an agent of remediation of Shakespeare’s texts” (p. 123). In discussing the memorable phrase of Fredson Bowers, that the role of the editor is “to pierce the veil of the printing process”, Squeo remarks, with wry restraint, that “The metaphorical association between the form imposed by print and a covering to be lifted has curiously attracted criticism”, quoting the suggestion of more recent critics that Bowers eroticised the process of editing, transforming editors into rapists (p. 123). Though her practice of using extensive short quotation from those she is discussing is effective,

there are times (as in this example) that I would have enjoyed hearing her own voice more clearly.

The second section of the book, “the digital turn” (p. 139), covers a fraction of the chronological history of the reception of Shakespeare’s works, but it justifiably takes up slightly more than half of the book. A major strength of Squeo’s approach lies in her appreciative and detailed case studies of experimental projects. She makes extensive use of graphics to communicate some sense of the impact of the screen; in the process, however, the necessarily static images tend also to demonstrate the inadequacy of print in explicating the nature of the digital experience. Individual chapters deal with digital editions, the remarkable expansion of archival sites, and an extensive discussion of future possibilities.

Squeo begins her exploration of digital Shakespeares by outlining early experiments that use the screen to represent the instability, the “distinctive fluidity” (p. 150), of the text. Taking a well-known textual crux, Hamlet’s “too, too sallid/sullied/solid” flesh, Alan Galey wittily renders its uncertainty through animation (*Visualizing Variation*); David Small, with the assistance of IBM and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, creates a dynamic “textual landscape” (p. 160) where the entire text of a play can be manipulated or viewed in multiple scales (*Virtual Shakespeare*); and a team led by Jennifer Roberts-Smith exploits some of the tools of a video game in *SET (Simulated Environment for Theatre)*, where students, actors, or directors can create multiple “lines of action” (p. 169), animating avatars on a stage and manipulating the spaces between them.

In its aim of exhaustive documentation, the variorum edition has always been difficult to manage in print because of its demand for multiple views: the text itself, its variants in editions over time, and the commentary that has accumulated around it. In the digital medium, however, these layers of data lend themselves readily, even elegantly, to the structure, functionality and searchability of a relational database. Early work, again by Alan Galey, demonstrates how this technology can unpack the “thicket of scholarly conventions that limit accessibility of the [*New Variorum Shakespeare*] to the larger public” (p. 183, quoting Paul Werstine). As well as recording the value of publicly available archives of prestigious and well-known organisations like the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust and the Folger Shake-

speare Library, Squeo discusses a range of projects from around the world that provide digital galleries including “not only illustrations, but also photographs, audio and video recordings of stage and film performances” (p. 212).

The medium of the Web lends itself readily to the hypertext edition, where a clean, uncluttered display of the text can link intuitively to additional information, extending the interface according to the needs of the reader/user. Through her detailed case study of *King Lear* edited by this reviewer on the scholarly open access site, *Internet Shakespeare Editions (ISE)*, Squeo examines ways in which the Web can facilitate and extend the experience of the reader within the dramatically increased spaces it makes available. Performance editions in particular can take advantage of what is effectively unlimited server capacity to deliver multimedia artefacts. Squeo outlines different experimental approaches to the relationship between text and performance on the *ISE*, the *Queen’s Men Editions*, and *Richard Brome Online*, culminating in a sympathetic case study of *Hamlet on the Ramparts*, created by Peter Donaldson in collaboration with the Folger Shakespeare Library (p. 227 ff.). The limitations of a print study of digital resources becomes especially clear in the discussion of MIT’s exceptional database of *Shakespeare Around the Globe* curated by Peter Donaldson and Alexa Alice Joubin, because the static page can communicate very little of the content or impact of the original videos. It is typical of Squeo’s balanced approach that in her discussion of the growing use of video clips in digital editions she asks important questions about the way that video may “insinuate into the reading experience” (pp. 231-32).

Humanists have traditionally conducted their research in splendid isolation, as individuals rather than as teams. Digital projects, however, provide an opportunity not only for amassing extensive archives of text and multimedia, but for creating networks that reach beyond the individual and situate Shakespeare in a far broader context. In her discussion of the direction future digital projects may take (p. 235 ff.), Squeo takes the example of the published aims of *LEMDO (Linked Early Modern Drama Online)* project at the University of Victoria headed by Janelle Jenstad and Brett Greatly-Hirsch. *LEMDO* situates the next generation of the *ISE* within a structure that can potentially “host scholarly editions of all known early modern dramatic texts” (p. 238,

quoting Jenstad). By providing access to extensive archives of contemporary documents, digital editions will have the opportunity to facilitate the “hermeneutics of recovery” (p. 260), and be able to take advantage of the wide and growing range of powerful tools for “computer-assisted language and text analysis” (p. 236), and “machine-assisted reading” (p. 244) she outlines and discusses in some detail. Squeo concludes this section with an extended case study of a possible structure for an edition of *The Merchant of Venice* (pp. 255-84) in which she demonstrates “how currently available digital resources and tools may expand hermeneutic horizons in Shakespeare textual studies” (p. 256) using currently available web-based tools as part of an intensive and detailed close reading of the text. Through a generous selection of screen shots of the tools she is discussing she illustrates the power they can potentially offer the user, providing particularly helpful examples of the use of a “key resource in the field” (p. 245) based at the University of Toronto, Ian Lancashire’s innovative and extensive online dictionary *LEME* (*Lexicons of Early Modern English*) (p. 262 ff.). While arguing persuasively for the usefulness of these resources, the complexity of the screen shots she provides illustrates the continuing challenge of making sophisticated linguistic tools accessible for Humanities scholars, who may have relatively basic digital skills.

Although Squeo’s vision of the future of digital editions is very positive, she is careful to point out the challenges that editors face as they adapt to the still-new medium. If scholars have a steep learning curve in navigating advanced applications, researchers creating the tools also face additional challenges. Browsers and operating systems are continually being updated, with the result that many of the websites and applications she describes are already no longer being maintained or are dependent on outdated technology; a number of these have already become inaccessible, and those that are maintained are often led by deeply committed individuals rather than enjoying the more stable support of institutions or libraries. The admirable *Endings* project at the University of Victoria (p. 242) provides guidance and tools for ensuring that digital projects can be preserved in a sustainable way, but, as Squeo observes, the “inherently unstable nature of digital resources requires expensive maintenance and constant updating” (p. 241). Open access sites rely on granting agencies whose aim is to foster innovation rather than to provide continuing funding for

maintaining the viability of work substantially completed. In addition, they are unable to link to commercial sites and experience difficulty in any attempt to access data (text, image, video) protected by copyright restrictions (p. 218). It may be that we have reached a stage where the digital medium is becoming more accepted as a scholarly platform, but Squeo notes that there is still an academic research culture that at times remains reluctant to embrace publication on open access sites (p. 242).

As a first step in facing these challenges, Squeo stresses the importance of ensuring that Digital Humanities projects support each other by seeking ways in which they can work together to ensure interoperability, accessibility, and reusability. Very much aware of the difficulty of this aim, she details the challenges and limitations of the most widely accepted framework for encoding Humanities texts, the Text Encoding Initiative (TEI), but leaves open the question of the degree to which the guarantee of standardisation may of necessity limit freedom of experimentation (pp. 242-43). Editors who undertake the task of encoding their own work will be taking on the demanding task of learning the equivalent of another language; the nature of editing is changing, as is the sense of editorial responsibility (pp. 282-83). In a time of ready access to online dictionaries and other previously inaccessible resources, some commentators have suggested that the role of the editor has been diminished; Squeo's study demonstrates the contrary, that the process of encoding online texts requires high level editorial decisions, that the editor's presence remains essential in the creation of a base text with its linked explanatory notes, and that their scholarly expertise is essential in selecting the format and content of supporting materials and links to related resources.

Although Squeo makes "no aim of exhaustiveness" (p. 100), a principal value of her study is that it is meticulously documented, comprehensive, and wide-ranging. The still-evolving area of digital Shakespeares is exciting and complex; at a moment when Shakespeareans are celebrating the publication of the first collection of Shakespeare's plays, *Print and Digital Remediations of the Shakespearean Text* is a timely reminder of the continuing evolution of the reception of his work, and a valuable study of the influence of digital and multimedia tools on current research in the field.

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Stagg, Robert, *Shakespeare's Blank Verse: An Alternative History*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2022, x + 227 pp.

It is easy to forget that several terms which we normally use to talk about metres and prosody are relatively recent. The very phrase 'iambic pentameter' seems to have been quite rarely used in reference to English poetry and drama before the late eighteenth century; the word 'fourteener' began to designate a metre only from the beginning of the nineteenth century, and even 'enjambment' seems to have entered the English language in the Victorian period. The case of 'blank verse' is different: the phrase was already in use in the 1580s and 1590s with, for example, Thomas Nashe denouncing, with alliterative gusto, the "swelling bumbast of bragging blanke verse" (1589) and Robert Greene/Henry Chettle mocking that "upstart crow, beautified with our feathers, that [...] supposes he is as well able to bombast out a blanke verse as the best of you" (1592). And yet, as Robert Stagg demonstrates in his scintillating monograph, the histories behind not just Shakespeare's blank verse, but blank verse in general, are multiple and marked by an idiosyncratic process of reinvention.

"By the time Shakespeare was working on 3 *Henry 6*, blank verse was newly old" (p. 19) – a metre first devised in the late 1530s or early 1540s by Henry Howard, the Earl of Surrey, for his translation of Books 2 and 4 of *The Aeneid*, probably prompted by the Italian *versi sciolti* he had become familiar with in France. So much for blank verse being "like a lane / In the deep rural regions" of merry England, as sung by the Pre-Raphaelite James Smetham (in his 1893 poem, *Blank Verse*), or its being the original "national metre", according to John Addington Symonds. Stagg quite rightly defines the history of Shakespearean and pre-Shakespearean blank verse "as much a matter of 'confluence' (Bruce Smith's word) as of 'influence'" (p. 12) and it should be remembered that when Book 4 of Surrey's translation of Virgil's masterpiece was published in 1554 it was advertised on the title page as follows: "drawne into a straunge metre" (and Stagg stresses that the adjective is to be read meaning more 'alien' and 'foreign' rather than 'unfamiliar' or 'odd', p. 28). Blank verse was then used for other genres, and, as is well known, was experimentally introduced into English drama by Thomas Norton and Thomas Sackville with their *Gorboduc* (1561); the metre was rather slowly and hesitantly popularised in the professional

playhouses later in the century. Blank verse became 'again' the metre of epic with Milton's *Paradise Lost*, but its origin and function were contested already in the seventeenth century – as can be seen by considering Dryden's 1664 claim that Shakespeare invented it, a peculiar assertion that Stagg tries to understand by reflecting on what 'invention' meant in the period, foregrounding the "januarial quality" of the word, "its facing both forward and back" (p. 156 – think of *inventio* in rhetoric). But what constitutes the blankness of blank verse has proved a more complex question than one may superficially think: blankness does not simply equate with rhymelessness, and this book delves into the field with insightful acumen and scholarly understanding.

From the start, Stagg proceeds to question long-established notions about blank verse and versification in general which are revealed to be little more than platitudes or simply wrong. In the introduction, he debunks what he funnily labels the "de-dum-de-dumbing down of verse" (p. 1) and explodes notions such as iambic pentameter being written imitating the rhythms of the human heart ("Contemporary physicians disputed whether the heartbeat and pulse were synchronous or alternating [...] the heart was conceived of less as a pump than as a 'fountain' [...] [which] promises something more various than a two-tone, de-dum prosody", p. 2) or the idea that iambic pentameter is the most manageable metre to accommodate human breathing (the French alexandrine is its equivalent, so to speak, and it would be ridiculous to imagine that the French have larger lungs than the British, p. 3).

Stagg is aware that this subject matter is difficult: in the "Note on Metrical Conventions", he warns his readers that "[t]here is certainly no point pretending that [...] the systematic elements of prosodic study can simply be pushed aside" (p. x), but he successfully manages to demonstrate how vital and important a heightened appreciation of versification can prove when it comes to Shakespeare's blank verse, especially when one historicises what was happening in Tudor England. Prosody had a political dimension, "questions of 'form' proving central to the Re-form-ation" (p. 10). This does not entail a falling back to the naïve idea condemned by scholars including Caroline Levine and Derek Attridge (in varying degrees, see Attridge 2021, p. 8) whereby "[c]ritics [...] have often assumed that prosody is political insofar as it mirrors rhythms in the world" (Levine 2015, p.

79), but a recognition that metres do not develop in a vacuum and that “prosodic theorization [is embedded] in the socio-political environment of the time” (Attridge 2019, p. 153).

This is a book that shows that Benedick may well describe the quality of blank verse as an “even road” (*Much Ado About Nothing*, V.ii.33-34), but it is actually a route which has many byways and spiralling courses – blank verse “being a tradition more than a creation” (p. 10). And this passage nicely encapsulates the author’s position on Shakespeare’s uses of the metre:

[...] Shakespeare’s blank verse is itself a form for or of alternatives. It tugs away from the end-stops that nevertheless sustain and structure it. It absorbs and increasingly composes itself by alternative forms of versification, from the seven-syllable line to the fourteeners. It is unrhymed yet is often timed by rhyme, preferring to make rhyme its complementary alternative rather than (as quantitative verse had done) its detested opponent. (p. 170)

In order to explain these characteristics of Shakespeare’s versification, the book has a dual approach to his blank verse, “attend[ing] to the double quality of [Shakespeare’s] ‘theatrical and literary art’” (p. 12), considering also, as can be garnered by the previous quotation, how it operates alongside different metres and rhyme. Just as it cannot be a coincidence that Time as Chorus in 4.1 of *The Winter’s Tale* delivers a speech of 16 rhymed couplets to cover the 16 years’ gap between the first and the second part of the play (a feature that Shakespeare’s readers, hardly the spectators, can realise), so too does Stagg pay close attention to the effects of the metre on the stage. And it may be helpful to remember how important prosody was in the early modern period, as well illuminated by Coburn Freer:

The *close listening habits* of Renaissance audiences seem much more understandable when we recall the *aural bias* of their early education. With emphasis upon verse as one of the chief means of instruction, no matter what the subject, it follows that even modestly educated persons could hear the meters of poetry as they would occur, on the stage or in everyday speech. Vendors with their street cries, ballad mongers and pitchmen, all thought, spoke, and sang in poetry [...] (1981, p.38, italics mine)

It was “a rhyming age” where “verses swarm / At every stall”, as Ben Jonson put in *An Elegy* (posthumously published in 1640), where

“rhyming” refers to versification, not necessarily rhymed, but sometimes certainly badly made. The blankness of blank verse, and particularly Shakespeare’s, that is a blankness “of rhyme, of other acoustic resources, of the verse itself” “is always open to be filled, hence the absorptive tendency of blank verse to what might otherwise be thought its acoustic alternatives” (p. 174). This is a particularly valuable observation, as it helps to situate contemporary critiques: “For Nashe and Greene, blank verse was empty because it was full of acoustic nothing. It was a prosodically phatic utterance” (p. 177).

The book is articulated as follows. The first chapter explores why Shakespeare’s early blank verse was critiqued by his contemporaries as “bombast” and how Shakespeare worked throughout his career in reaction to such criticism, by introducing innovations such as feminine endings and late caesurae, but maintaining a stressed tenth syllable. Chapter 2 deals with the ways in which Shakespeare deployed, absorbed, and transformed the forms and metres of the popular metrical culture of the sixteenth century (Stagg’s interpretation of Shakespeare’s seven-syllable lines, esp. as far as *Macbeth* is concerned, as a way of expressing deformity is of particular note). In the next chapter, the author considers in depth Shakespeare’s use of rhyme but also, perhaps surprisingly, what he calls “Shakespeare’s oblique, acoustically glancing engagement with” the (failed) revival of quantitative versification (p. 115): Shakespeare is “able to hear a sort of duration, narrative, and timeliness in rhyme, which may have been cued by a syncretic grammar-school understanding of the unrhymed, and often anti-rhyme, quantitative verse” (p. 147). The final chapter is devoted to the histories behind editing Shakespeare’s blank verse, from the First Folio to Alexander Pope through Dryden. Pope’s procrustean method in revising Shakespeare’s verses is interestingly compared to that of “an archaeologist” “removing Shakespeare’s lines [...] from the rubble and dross of their textual burial in the quartos and folios, then buffing them back to something like their original condition” (p. 157).

Stagg is very perceptive in his discussions of how versification modifies our perception of Shakespearean passages. Consider, for example, his contrastive analysis of the quarto and the folio readings of Othello’s accusation in IV.ii: “O *Desdemona*, away, away, away” (Q) vs. “Ah *Desdemon*, away, away, away”. In the quarto, “[t]he ‘a’ at the

end of Desdemona's name [...] provokes a tremor in Othello's verse before an iambic rhythm continues through the second syllable of 'away' (which if every 'away' is unelided, helps tip the line into eleven syllables)" (p. 162). The folio's "Desdemon" "sooth[es] the quarto's metrical disturbace" (ibid.), but while "[i]n the quarto, Othello sounds the full length of Desdemona's name so that we hear a prolonged moan within *Desdemo[a]na*" (dynamically contrasted with the O's of Othello's name, "sonically bounded by the sounds of woe", p. 163), the folio "robs Desdemona of her proper name and with it her propriety", "giv[ing] her a bad name" (p. 164). Stagg's perception of "moan" at the centre of that name might derive from what Scott L. Newstok has called "[Kenneth] Burke's characteristically suggestive but erratic derivation" of Desdemona from "moan-death" (2007, n1 to Chapter 6, n.n.), but he is aware of its origin in Cinthio's novella, *Disdemona*, from Greek *des* + *daimon*, the ill-fated one, and Stagg signals that the Folio's "Desdemon" "reduces Shakespeare's character to her etymological and literary reading" following the editors' "relatively uncompromising quest for metrical tidiness" (p. 164).

Robert Stagg's book is an important contribution to the study of Shakespeare's versification. It builds on the scholarly works of metrists and prosodists including Derek Attridge, O. B. Hardison, Marina Tarlinskaja, Eric Weiskott, and George T. Wright, but it can stand on its own *con scioltezza* (free from any bondage), providing readers with innovative and illuminating ways to approach Shakespeare's blank verse.

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From a twenty-first-century perspective, it seems incredible that anyone could have deprioritised the rendering of Plato's long-lost works into the learned language of fifteenth-century scholarship, let alone Marsilio Ficino. Yet this is precisely what occurred in 1463 when he presented his patron Cosimo de' Medici with a dilemma. Which would the uncrowned ruler of Florence prefer to have rendered from ancient Greek into neo-Latin first? The miraculously rediscovered dialogues of Plato or the *Corpus Hermeticum* of the "thrice-great" magus Hermes Trismegistus? Cosimo had acquired fourteen Greek manuscripts that Ficino believed were the works of Hermes himself. The aged magnifico, who would die the next year and be known posthumously as *Pater patriae*, insisted that Plato could wait upon the translation of the works of this magician, alchemist, hermeticist, and medical expert – which were later exposed as spurious, as was the man himself, unknown to Ficino. He was thus only too happy to comply in undertaking the enterprise, and used it to help spearhead the study of hermeticism in early modern Europe. Like his contemporaries, he believed that Hermes lived in the time of Moses and wrote in an Egyptian language, which a helpful intermediary had transformed into Greek. The *Corpus*, then, provided the ancient *prisca theologia* that Orpheus studied, Pythagoras read, and that Plato depended upon as foundational to his thought. This alleged philosophical inheritance might have influenced Cosimo's thinking that the *Republic* and other dialogues could find their audiences at a later date. Clearly, the Thrice-Great came first.

In her study *Alchemy, Paracelsianism, and Shakespeare's "The Winter's Tale"*, Martina Zamparo discusses such hermetic matters and fol-

lows fascinating related pathways as they meet in Shakespeare's late play. She notes that James I interested himself in the study of alchemy to complement his notorious fixation on witchcraft, and pursued the comprehension of Paracelsian medicine and, of course, the legendary Hermes. She uses language and incidents from *The Winter's Tale* to support her claim that the play operates at times as alchemical allegory and that its action demonstrates a complete turn of the *rota alchemica* itself. She argues that once Leontes and his queen Hermione, whom he has treated so disgracefully, have been "dissevered", Paulina, herself a kind of magus, reunites them. Shakespeare's audience might well have recognized that this "sad tale [...] best for winter" (*WT* II.ii.34) comprises "an alchemical allegory expressing deep truths about man, art, nature, and death" (p. 2). Its crazed king represents *rex chymicus*, rusted metal that must be refined and purified into perfection. Accordingly, his fiercest critic and ultimate savior becomes a "healing woman" who cures him and restores his wife to him, perhaps undeservedly, by her knowledge of alchemy and Paracelsian medicine (p. 29).

The author notes that Shakespeare mentions Paracelsus by name only once in his works, but the manner of reference helps validate the theme of her book. When Lafew ecstatically praises Helena's skill in her mysterious cure of the king in *All's Well That Ends Well* (II.iii), he suggests that she is equal to the acclaimed physician as well as to Galen. Though the old courtier can be forgiven for his hyperbole, the foolish Parolles cannot be excused for his derision at Lafew's comparison. That such a gadfly would discount the heroine's Paracelsian-Galenic medical feat by mocking her elderly herald suggests that Shakespeare believes the opposite of Parolles's scornful asides – that the efficacy of this practical ancient art proves that "miracles", as Lafew says, are not "past". They are, in fact, precisely the means by which Paulina effects her magic in her play, as Zamparò shows us. The exchange itself between Lafew and Parolles symbolizes that age-old sacred wisdom is designed to trump the folly that would discount it.

In the first section of this study's tripartite structure, the introduction chronicles the development of alchemical thought in late medieval and early modern Europe excellently and concisely (pp. 1-30). The next two chapters offer a history of alchemy in Elizabethan and Jacobean England (pp. 31-106). They account for the practise of the art as

essential to the cult of Elizabeth and a chronicle of those who championed it during her reign. This background matter also explores the continuation and development of this pseudo-science, along with Paracelsianism and hermeticism in James's court. His circle of courtiers utilized this occult knowledge and indulged the king's interest in natural magic as he had manifested in his *Daemonologie* (1597).

The second section of *Alchemy, Paracelsianism* offers a thorough analysis of how this topic informs *The Winter's Tale* at its most celebrated junctures: the "rebirth" of Perdita, the sheep-shearing festivities, the presence of Florizell, and the art and nature debate between Perdita and Polixenes that reveals her precocity regarding alchemical art and knowledge. Hermeticism also influences the play's conclusion featuring the "statue" of Hermione and the work of Paulina in her role, according to the study, as Lady Alchymia (pp. 107-312). The third section discusses the play in terms of the *prisca sapientia* attributed to Hermes and its relation to Jacobean politics and the king's dabbling in magic (pp. 313-32). A continual theme, especially in the book's middle and end, is that alchemy, magic, hermeticism, and drama were all closely related, and that one can see this at work elsewhere in Shakespeare when considering Prospero from *The Tempest* as a kind of magus, the opposite of the type of the evil magician exemplified by Cornelius Agrippa (p. 81). Or, as Zamparo puts it, "the transformative art of alchemy and that of drama coalesce and their healing effects are actualised by Paulina" (p. 311).

The study's most eloquent and incisive observations are devoted to Perdita, with whom the author identifies. Of the sixteen-year-old's debate with her future father-in-law about the legitimacy of gillyvors, Zamparo writes: "although objecting to the artificial intervention into the natural world, the girl herself is, rather surprisingly, a personification of that synthesis of art and nature that Polixenes supports and that is at the core of the alchemical philosophy" (p. 249). In this way, Shakespeare identifies her "with the perfective role performed by art with regards to nature," and she as a result personifies a "refined synthesis" of the two entities. Since Polixenes essentially subscribes to a Paracelsian definition of art that, in its ideal form, can actually improve nature, "everyone who leads nature to perfection is an alchemist. Therefore, Florizel's assertion that Perdita 'betters what is done' (*WT* IV.iv.136) suggests that the girl's role in the romance is

to ‘perfect’ what has been left ‘imperfect’”. She ultimately “leads the redemptive, and obliquely alchemical, cycle of the play to its right completion” (p. 254).

Zamparo contributes to scholarship on the topics she analyzes. She informs *Alchemy, Paracelsianism* with the work of her predecessors, such as Lyndy Abraham’s *Dictionary of Alchemical Imagery* (2011); Meredith Ray’s *Daughters of Alchemy* (2013); and Mary Floyd-Wilson’s *Occult Knowledge, Science and Gender on the Shakespearean Stage* (2013). There is considerably more than this in the book, however, that utilizes innumerable sources on alchemy, hermeticism, magic, and *The Winter’s Tale*. An especially valuable feature of the text as an e-book is the twenty-eight high-resolution images from manuscripts and printed sources, most of them in color, which helps the reader visualize the materials that early moderns used. Though it is wonderful to behold the diversity of current cultural studies devoted to Shakespeare, inevitably such approaches seem less focused on his time than on our own, more concerned with the subjectivity of the critics offering their conclusions. In contrast, the author of the book under review is to be commended for demonstrating how deeply dyed a Shakespeare text can be in its pan-European, transhistorical intellectual milieu, in ways that would be invisible to most twenty-first century readers without a guide as learned and as well-written as this.

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Abstracts

Juliet Furens: Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet as Senecan Drama

DAVID ADKINS

In what may be *Romeo and Juliet's* most frightening moment, Juliet imagines what it might be like to awake in a crypt. Juliet's nightmarish fantasy reads as Senecan, owing not least to her vision of Tybalt's ghost, an element that derives ultimately from Bandello. But though Shakespeare's version of the speech closely follows its sources, where it is original it greatly expands upon their Senecanism, culminating with a memory of *Hercules Furens*: rather than imagine the dead dismembering her, as in Bandello, Boaistuau, and Brooke, Shakespeare's Juliet fears that she, like the mad Hercules, will desecrate the bodies of her family, plucking Tybalt's corpse from its shroud and wielding a human bone as a club. If the play becomes a tragedy with the deaths of Tybalt and Mercutio, it is here that it becomes Senecan tragedy, for the Roman playwright haunts *Romeo and Juliet* to its end, hence Juliet's Polixena-like radiance before death. This essay argues that *Romeo and Juliet* – a play that rarely appears in discussions of Shakespeare's reception of Roman tragedy – channels the terror and fury of Senecan personae, but also an attitude toward death that looks beyond Stoic resignation and toward transcendence.

Keywords: Juliet, Shakespeare's Sources, Imagination, Ghosts, Hercules, Madness, Transcendence

"No Lucrece": The Ambiguity of Rape in The Queen of Corinth

TOMMASO CONTINISIO

From the lens of New Historicism, the protagonists of Jacobean drama are deeply entangled in their social milieu, their identities inseparable from the context enveloping them. This entwined existence leaves them adrift, wrestling

with an elusive self-definition, and lost in the absence of a recognisable 'with-in'. Confronted with the Other, these characters hover on the edge of identity, navigating a liminal space that blurs the boundaries between self and society. Against this backdrop, I propose a reading of *The Queen of Corinth*, a play presumably written in 1616-1618 by Fletcher, Field, and Massinger. Specifically, I shall attempt to show how Merione, the most important character of the play, reacts to her rape in a way that deviates from the norm, since her courageous solution challenges the prevailing belief that suicide is the sole path to preserve honour. The tragicomic resolution of *The Queen of Corinth* suggests that the wrongdoer should not meet death but rather be forced to marry the victim of his violence – a change consistent with the spirit of Fletcher and his collaborators. Merione's decision is a momentary claim of her own self, pushing back against the skewed subjectivity imposed by the male characters' discourses throughout the play.

Keywords: Rape, Tragicomedy, *The Queen of Corinth*, Subjectivity, Lucrece

"Like to the Pontic sea": Early Modern Medea and the Dramatic Significance of Othello III.iii.456-61

FRANCESCO DALL'OLIO

This article offers a new take on a passage from the 'seduction scene' in *Othello* (III.iii.456-61), where scholarship has often recognized an imitation of a passage from Seneca's *Medea* (404-7). It argues that this imitation has a deeper dramatic significance than previously recognized. It connects *Othello* to a well-established literary tradition founded on the perception of Medea in early modern English literature as a model of foreign, revengeful and powerful femininity. For this reason, her figure was, in Elizabethan prose and theatre, compared to or used as a model for the characterization either of rebellious female characters breaking societal norms to satisfy 'unnatural' desires, or for male characters suffering identity, social and/or gender, degradation. The passage in *Othello* apparently follows the same pattern. However, the context highlights a difference from this tradition, in so far as *Othello* is only an ambivalently integrated foreigner. The article shows how the imitation of Seneca's *Medea* in the seduction scene fits into the dramatic and thematic patterns of *Othello*, contributing to the recent re-evaluation of continuities between this play and Senecan drama.

Keywords: *Othello*, *Medea*, Seneca, Otherness, Classical reception in early modern literature

“Teach me how to curse”: Senecan Historiography and Octavia’s Agrippina in Richard III

CAROLINE ENGELMAYER

This article extends explorations of a Renaissance “Seneca available for generic appropriation” (Mayne 2020) by tracing Shakespeare’s receptions of the pseudo-Senecan *Octavia* in *Richard III*. As the only complete *fabula praetexta* (Roman historical drama) to have survived from antiquity, the *Octavia* offers critics the chance to trace the dramatic resources that an underexplored classical genre offered to early modernity. In the *Octavia*, an anonymous Flavian tragedy attributed to Seneca in the Renaissance, Shakespeare encountered a historiographical debate – invested in exploring processes of cultural memory and national myth-making – that interrogates the arc of Rome’s past. In *Richard III*, Shakespeare intervenes in the *Octavia*’s historiographical clash between Nero, who champions a teleological vision of the peace and stability of *imperium sine fine*, and the ghost of Agrippina, who locates in the ruling dynasty’s regime a cyclical continuation of Roman wars worse than civil. By reimagining Agrippina in Margaret of Anjou – an unrecognized adaptation – and staging the fulfilment of her Octavian curses, Shakespeare dramatizes the triumph of her cyclical philosophy of history. He discovers in the *praetexta* an unlikely source of inspiration for female voices from the margins that purge the sins of tyranny and shape the trajectory of a nation’s history.

Keywords: Seneca, Shakespeare, *Octavia*, *Richard III*, historical drama, curses

Seneca’s Metamorphoses, from Chaucer to Shakespeare

DOMINIQUE GOY-BLANQUET

The Roman author of tragedies entered the Italian, French and English stages through the works of jurists. Lawyers, law and judgment played a significant part in his progress through the Middle Ages down to Shakespeare, down to us now through layers of time and critical approaches. How far Seneca influenced the English playwright, from the shrill calls for revenge of the early plays to the later debates on justice, in trial scenes performed before audiences playing judge and jury, that remains the question to be discussed here.

Keywords: Lawyers, Playwrights, Chroniclers, Politics, *Pro et contra* pleas, Ghosts, Revenge, Translation

Seneca Improved: Shakespeare's Medieval Optimism

PATRICK GRAY

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.

Keywords: Nihilism, Calvinism, Romance, Medieval drama, Tragedy, Tragicomedy

Shakespeare and the English Seneca in Print: Collections, Authorship, Collaboration, and Pedagogies of Play-Reading

TARA LYONS

Scholars of English Renaissance drama have long argued that Shakespeare's dramatic form and style were indebted to the tragedies of Lucius Annaes Seneca (the Younger). This scholarship has taught us what we know about Shakespeare's relationship to classical tragedy as well as the Senecan motifs he appropriated and intensified for the stage. Such analysis, however, rarely contends with how editions of Seneca's works informed Shakespeare's plays on the page.

As students and scholars of the English book trade know, printers and publishers were conservative in their fashioning of books, especially when introducing new authors and genres to their readers. In effect, we can trace print motifs from the editions of Seneca's tragedies from 1560 to 1581 through to the playbooks and drama collections published decades later. As I argue here, the bibliographical organization and paratextual devices used in English editions of Seneca's tragedies taught early English readers how to engage with printed drama and to read plays as whole works rather than as repositories of parts, scenes, and sententiae. I propose that this pedagogical lesson allowed the market for stage plays to emerge and collected editions like the Shakespeare First Folio to reach a "great variety" of readers.

Keywords: Elizabethan translations, Book history, Authorship, Play reading, Paratexts

The Dark Side: Seneca and Shakespeare

ROBERT S. MIOLA

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

Domesticating Seneca

STEPHEN ORGEL

From the late seventeenth century, Seneca has had a bad press in England. Heavily rhetorical and declamatory, the plays were repeatedly declared unsuited to the stage. For the Elizabethan and Jacobean theater, however, Seneca was a model for drama, an essential resource. The plays were taught in school, and translations of all ten plays attributed to Seneca appeared between 1560 and 1581. Not only the early Shakespeare, especially *Titus Andronicus*, but even plays like *King Lear* and *Othello* reflect Seneca's influence. This is largely invisible to us because our way of performing Shakespeare renders soliloquies meditative rather than declamatory, and strives for naturalism rather than stylization.

Keywords: *Oedipus*, Seneca, Translation, Revenge, Performance

Voicing the Unspeakable. Political Dissent in Three Early Modern Plays

ROSSANA SEBELLIN

This paper explores how the lower classes voice discontent or political dissent in an acceptable balance between insubordination and formal respect of authority in three early modern texts written between the 1590s and the first decade of the 17th century. The plays under analysis are *The Life of Jack Straw* and *Thomas of Woodstock* (both anonymous) and Shakespeare's *Richard II*, which all deal with the same sovereign and his reign, characterised by three main crises. Despite their distinct approaches, they all address political grievances and present their own interpretations of monarchy, political power and the role of kingship. The comparison shows interesting shifts in the vision of the commonwealth and in the perception of power in a clear progression towards radicalisation in the criticism of the king, which leads to the later Civil War.

Keywords: *Jack Straw*, *Thomas of Woodstock*, *Richard II*, Political dissent, Drama

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