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It is entitled:
The Renaissance Tragic Interior and Its Classical Substructure

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The Renaissance Tragic Interior and Its Classical Substructure

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate School
of the University of Cincinnati
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in the Department of English and Comparative Literature
of the College of Arts and Sciences
by

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Abstract

How similar is the Classical private interior which birthed the public archetype of the *vir bonus* to the idea of identity which we now label “modern’ and to which Shakespearean characters lay claim when they assert selfhood by name: “always I am Caesar”; “I am Antony yet”? Over the last 15 years or so, the emergent field of Classical scholarship which has followed the cultural materialist and New Historicist turn in English studies has led to a reconsideration of such questions. Taking advantage of these new lines of inquiry, this discussion examines the extent to which Early Modern identity, as revealed in the works of sixteenth and seventeenth-century tragedians, takes its psychological scaffolding from Classical models, originating with the archaic Greek heroes of Homer and modified by the rhetorical and theatrical tropes of writers and statesmen from the Roman Republic and Imperiate, such as Cicero, Seneca, and Quintilian. Each strand of the argument considers how Classical writers understood their own identities, both idealized and actual. Given that the influence of the Graeco-Roman psychological interior on its Renaissance successor is mediated by intervening centuries of Catholic ideology and Mediaeval appropriation, the avenues of reception for Classical thought in the Renaissance are considered as part of the argument.
Acknowledgements

This project could not have been completed without the help of the faculty from the University of Cincinnati English Department, not only in accommodating my work schedule but for providing me the academic tools necessary to get to this stage. Thanks are due particularly to Professor Russel Durst for getting me going, Professor Beth Ash for keeping me honest, and Professors Julia Carlson and Michael Griffith for stepping in at short notice to be my readers. Most especially, I owe thanks to Professor Jon Kamholtz, without whose guidance, encouragement, and practical support, I would never have gotten this far.
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Introduction

I Am I.

I. Defining the Self

“Who’s there?” Barnardo famously asks in the opening line of *Hamlet*. Four lengthy acts pass before the prince seems to be able to respond with any kind of definitly, “This is I / Hamlet the Dane.” In his cultural materialist examination of the seventeenth-century split psyche, *Tremulous Private Body* (1995), Francis Barker points out that the Hamlet who boards the pirate ship, wrestles with Laertes in Ophelia’s grave, and ultimately kills the king is a wholly different prince from the earlier procrastinator: he is become a man-of-action who has broken through the stifling social conditions that consign him to the hand-wringing of the first four acts. Renaissance tragedy in general seems to concern itself at times almost exclusively with the notion of interior space breaking through boundaries. This irruption of the private into the public has been theorized extensively by Hegel et al., and most frequently, it manifests as a Senecan statement of identity: “Know I am Hieronimo”¹; “‘Tis I, ‘tis Vindice, ‘tis I!”²; “I am / Antony yet”³; “Richard loves Richard, that is, I am I”⁴. In the face of this litany of names and first person pronouns, the obvious questions arise as to how these boundaries came into being, why the phenomenon should erupt in the dramaturgy of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and what it is these characters think they are naming.

The first of these two questions have already been addressed by the considerable body of theory arguing that modern, autonomous subjectivity has its origin point in the Renaissance—a period which marks the beginning of the overdetermined self, existing at the intersection of the monarchical authority over the body, the Protestant claim on the conscience and the mercantile expectation for use value. In a Foucauldian sense, these forces act to give identity definition, thereby constituting it, but they do so by placing boundaries on autonomy and are perceived by that identity as the threatening, external other which must be accommodated or opposed. There is perhaps no better example of the transformative effect of such forces on the “I” than the enforcing of the First Act of Supremacy in 1534. Virtually overnight the Henrician Catholic subject finds himself with an imperative to choose between recusancy and treason or blasphemy and fealty—neither particularly appealing given the consequences, but more important than the choice itself is the manner in which the decision will have to be made. Aligning oneself with the German doctrine underpinning the Act would necessitate a turning inward to the self as the source of moral and ethical decision making and away from Catholic authority.

Given that the how and the why of identity construction have already been heavily theorized by the New Historicists and others, they are considered here to a lesser extent than the third question: what are Renaissance tragic heroes putting a name to? The direction of an answer is offered by A. J. Boyle, when he observes that Medea’s dramatic exclamations, Medea superest [Medea remains] and Medea nunc sum [Medea now I am] are the likely inspiration for these rhetorical flourishes of identity.\(^5\) This stoic response to adversity implies that Renaissance conceptions of interiority are to some extent scaffolded by Classical models of subjectivity. This argument, therefore, examines the extent to which such modeling takes place and the modes by

which Renaissance tragedy receives and mediates Classical understanding of self. Of course the proposition that the Renaissance is the demarcation point of modern interiority and even what it is being referring to by the word, “interior,” continue to be areas of vigorous contestation. Francis Barker, for example, claims that the citizens of sixteenth-century England did not yet have the category of private self from which autonomy could be generated. There is also little if any consensus even on what constitutes the “category of person,” as opposed to “person,” either by the structural anthropology of Claude Lévi-Strauss, the skepticism of Humean British empiricism, or the existential free-reign decision making proposed by individualists like Sartre.

If there is any broad agreement to be found, at least in contemporary theory, it is that the matrix of activities which make up conscious thought has an evolutionary history and that it is fundamental to the human condition only within cultural parameters. With this in mind, therefore, this discussion is confined to conceptions of self and autonomy that are specifically Western, while acknowledging that other cultures retain their own unique conceptions of private/public, inner/outer, group/individual, conscious/unconscious, arrived at by different historiographies. Equally, Mary Midgley has pointed out that, even within this narrower field of examination, “the whole idea of a free, independent, enquiring, choosing individual, an idea central to European thought, has always been the idea of a male… taking for granted the love and service of non-autonomous females.”

In light of the impossibility of addressing such a wide array of caveats by anything more than simple acknowledgement, the argument presented here loosely employs the notion of self developed in the evolutionary theories sketched out by the social anthropologists of *L'Année Sociologique* in the early part of the 20th century and especially, Marcel Mauss’s 1938 essay, “A

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Category of the Human Mind: The Notion of Person; The Notion of Self.”

Mauss traces the word *persona* back to its Latin origins and, even further, to the possible Etruscan borrowing of the Greek *perso* (πρόωπον), which is used by early Latin societies to indicate how an actor, through the mouth of the mask (*per*), projects the sound of the breath (*sonare*) during clan dances and festivals—the mask which will later have individual rights and names attributed to it. Some of these masks remain attached to privileged families of the *collegia*: “To the very end,” says Mauss, “the Roman senate thought of itself as being made up of a determinate number of *patres* representing the ‘persons’ (*personnes*), the ‘images of their ancestors.’”

While by the time of Cicero, the stoics had attributed morality to the *persona*, it is not until the Council of Nicea pronounces definitively in 325 CE the unity of the Holy Trinity as three in one and the two natures of Christ (*Unitas in tres personas, una persona in duas naturas*) that the Christian category of “person” understands itself as a metaphysical entity owing individual action and consciousness to God. In the Mediaeval period, the Christian “person” is still part of the body of the Catholic Church, of course. As the Protestant Theologian, Ernst Troeltsch, observes, the greatest pressure in this direction comes from Luther’s attempt to break up the power of Catholic ritual and dogma by ruling out salvation through works and replacing it with salvation through faith. This Lutheran inward contemplation (Troeltsch’s “inworldly aestheticism”), which encompasses the outer imperfect world, is later replaced by the dynamic participation of Calvin’s “Elect,” who attempt to change the imperfect material world through autonomous action rather than cope with it through autonomous reflection.

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8 The *imagines*: see Erasmo (2008), Dufallo (2007), and especially Flower (1996).
9 Mauss (1985) 17.
refinements to the historical model of the category of person provided by Kant, Hegel and the metaphysicians and philosophers of the later seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, together with the power-relation theorizing of Foucault in the twentieth, have steadily worked to elide the autonomy of the subject. However it is defined, the internally reflecting entity that we call the modern self clearly already exists by the time Shakespeare writes the great tragedies in the late 1500s and early 1600s.11

Interestingly, the late theories Foucault ultimately reach similar conclusions to those of Heidegger while proceeding from different assumptions. Taking its departure point from his seminal 1927 work, *Being and Time*, Heidegger’s phenomenological analysis of being intersects with Foucault’s theory of subject-as-discourse and power relations at the point where both theorists reject the Cartesian *cogito*, “a thing that thinks,” so to speak.12 This includes the concomitant assumption of being’s own interpretability by self-examination and by extension, the ability to autonomously act in a meaningful way. Heidegger begins by defining this opacity to the subject which defies self-examination:

> We call many things “existent” [seined], and in different senses. Everything we talk about, mean and are related to is in being in one way or another. *What* and *how* we ourselves *are* is also in being. Being is found in *thatness* and *whatness*, reality, the objective presence of things [*Vorhandenheit*], subsistence, validity, existence [*Da-sein*], and in the “there is” [*es gibt*]. In *which* being is the meaning of being to be found; from *which* being is the disclosure of being to get its start? Is the starting point arbitrary or does a certain being have priority in the elaboration of the question of being? Which is this exemplary being and in what sense does it have priority?13

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11 This position is disputed by cultural materialists, who argue that the advent of self-censoring in the seventeenth century ultimately forces the individual to look inward for true autonomy in the modern sense. For a fuller discussion, see chapter 2.
The intractability of separating out the subject from being itself in any more than the arbitrary manner which Heidegger here suggests leads him initially to replace the cogito with *Dasein*—an existence or a “beingness” which contains the “intentional comportments” that we think of as idiomatic of the reflective subject. The *Dasein* Heidegger initially sees as being embedded in the familiarity of unconscious actions that make up most of a person’s waking hours and only periodically does the *Dasein* become reflective, although it is to those moments that we attribute importance. Only by rejecting the idea that subjectivity and autonomy are any more than illusionary constructs and, instead, embracing marginal cultural practices of the past, along with the existential anxiety inherent in accepting ontological boundaries, can some freedom be achieved.

Heidegger later expands his theory of autonomous action being made possible through cultural paradigms by including the effect of the work of art, the nearness of a god, the sacrifice of a god, the ideas of a thinker, or the acts of a leader to gather together the strands of shared practices and to reconstitute them in a new way.\(^{14}\) Such reorganization, which Heidegger calls “truth setting itself to work,” generates a cultural opening (*Ereignis*) in which new acts can be performed, thereby giving meaning to being. The act of tending cultural practices not only maintains the unity of being but also resists the tendency of technology to order things into subjects and objects—a process that reduces the individual to “standing reserve,” matter which simply exists without reflection, meaning or freedom, or as Hamlet might say, “sense to ecstasy was ne'er so thrall'd, / But it reserved some quantity of choice / To serve in such a difference…. / Eyes without feeling, feeling without sight, / Ears without hands or eyes, smelling sans all” (4.3.70-78).

Like Heidegger, Foucault makes the assumption that there is no Kantian unity to being and proposes, instead, that the subject is a function of discourse. Thus, attempts to uncover the subject by any form of interior examination can only result in further erasure rather than reconstitution. He says in “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,”

The purpose of history, guided by genealogy, is not to discover the roots of our identity, but to commit itself to its dissipation. It does not seek to define our unique threshold of emergence, the homeland to which our metaphysicians promise a return; it seeks to make visible all those discontinuities that cross us…. If genealogy in its own right gives rise to questions concerning our native land, native language, or the laws that govern us, its intention is to reveal the heterogeneous systems which, masked by the self, inhibit the formation of any form of identity.15

However, the pessimism inherent in this early conceptualization of subjectivity and autonomy becomes mitigated somewhat as Foucault moves to a more nuanced view in his 1975 essay, “What Is an Author?”16 Here, he allows for the possibility that authorial acts might open up a discursive domain similar to Heidegger’s cultural clearing generated by the thinker or work of art. The interpretation and reinterpretation of the author’s work allows for the establishment of a new set of rules, not to be confused with the search for meaning, which Foucault dismisses as simple commentary. Rather, the interpretation is an appropriation which constantly remakes the possibilities for future interpretation, although the author position remains dispersed as a series of historical and cultural intersections. Ultimately, Foucault brings this view of constructed identity to bear on the Classical conception of self.

In his final published work, The Care of the Self (1984),17 Foucault turns his attention to Platonism and the attempts by Hellenistic culture to escape subjectivity by reifying the self.

15 Michel Foucault. Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews (Cornell UP 1977) 139–164: 162.
16 Ibid., 113–38.
through action, a trope which may go some way toward explaining the focal position that drama
holds in Greek ritual and culture. While both the late Heideggerian and Foucauldian worldviews
allow for the possibility that a subject can attain a form of freedom through understanding the
position of the self as part of a cultural matrix—a matrix which can itself be modified through
action, Foucault resists the idea of individual agency in a way that Heidegger does not. This
separation between the theorists opens a conceptual space on either side of which stand several
tragic figures, not the least of which are Oedipus and Hamlet. The Corinthian prince’s
application of intellect in solving the riddle and his later determination to uncover the source of
Thebes’s curse change outcomes and possibilities for the Thebans in the manner allowed for by
Heidegger’s conception of autonomy. The new possibilities opened by Oedipus’s freedom to be
an agent who self-generates determinations turn out to be tragic only through the intervention of
divine action which trumps that of mortal man. Conversely, Hamlet’s attempts to apply similar
strategies to Denmark’s problems result only in unpredictability and increasing chaos. Such an
interpretation illustrates the difference between Heidegger and Foucault’s late theories of the
self, which seem similar in form but which lead to quite different outcomes in practice. The
Heideggerian Greek world allows Oedipus some element of control,¹⁸ whereas Foucauldian
Denmark affords the prince a sense of freedom by embracing his position as “I / Hamlet the
Dane,” but those same power relations do not allow him to be only the “I” divorced from the
accompanying epithet. In such a Foucauldian reading of the play, by his act of self-naming,
Hamlet finally acknowledges that his identity as prince exists as a node at the intersection of the
same social and power relations which he has struggled for much of the play to escape.

¹⁸ Seneca’s version of the Oedipus story can be seen to operate somewhat differently, however. It has
been argued by Boyle and others that Seneca’s characters rely on knowledge of their own Greek mytho-
literary history in interpreting themselves: what Boyle calls “the palimpsestic code.” See Boyle 85–111
and also chapter 3.
II. Components of the Classical Self

This argument’s primary proposition, that the Early Modern tragic interior is built upon a framework developed in antiquity and reinterpreted in the Renaissance, employs a four-part structure, each strand of which takes a particular Classical author as its anchor point. These four models of the self are the rhetorical, the emotional, the theatrical, and the historical. The rhetorically constructed self focuses on statesmen of the first century BCE, particularly Cicero and his rhetoric manual, the *De oratore* (55 BCE). The second chapter interrogates our modern conception of emotional states versus the ways in which antiquity perceives those same states and especially the margins where the two cease to overlap. It has been convenient, for example, to regard “pity” and the Greek word *eleos* as both being covalent with “empathy” and “compassion.” As Konstan remarks, such an assumption of one-to-one mapping works to elide minor differences and facilitate smoother interpretation of ancient texts. However, it is very difficult to know for sure that the emotion we label “pity” is the same as the *eleos* Achilles feels when Priam comes to his tent to beg for the mangled body of Hector. This begs the question as to what emotions the Early Modern tragedians are really apportioning to their characters, the Renaissance being closer to us in time, but modeling itself on antiquity.

The impossibility of knowing with any certainty from our vantage point in the twenty-first century how the consciousness of four hundred years ago understands the rhetoric and emotions of two or three thousand years ago must be acknowledged, but what is not in doubt is the interest shown by Early Modern writers in the wealth of new Classical translations that became available in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The avenues of approach to the

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dramatic self that have the greatest weight of traditional scholarship behind them come from the theatrical and the metatheatrical tropes of Seneca’s tragedies and the ways in which they operate as foundational texts for dramaturgy in the Renaissance. Seneca also articulates well with the rhetorical component, given the concerns that Cicero and Quintilian express over the blending of stage histrionics with rhetorical argument in the law courts and the senate. The final chapter addresses how history can be seen to shape conceptions of identity, which itself implies an engagement with the modes in which Renaissance writers understood Graeco-Roman history and further, how Rome understood itself as an aggregate of the achievements of its greatest statesmen and generals. Given the centrality of Plutarch’s Parallel Lives to Shakespearean Classical tragedies, chapter four considers how Plutarch selects the focus of his own source material and how such elisions and transformations are further refined by the Early Moderns.

III. The Rhetorical Self

Examination of the rhetorical self in chapter one begins by exploring how the Early Modern subject employs Ciceronian rhetoric and stoicism to deal with the pressures inherent in courtly culture and the anxieties engendered by living under aristocratic caprice. Of the two, much has already been made of the uses to which Early Modern writers employed stoic philosophy. Perhaps the most comprehensive of such arguments is provided by Stephen Greenblatt, beginning with his seminal 1980 work, Renaissance Self-Fashioning, in which he traces the transformative effect that adopting stoicism as a response to courtly pressure has on the psyche of a variety of writers from Thomas More through to Shakespeare. Submission to the absolute authority of the monarchical state—or at least to “a distorted image of [its] authority,” according to Greenblatt, forces the subject to fashion an identity which will be acceptable to the
court while remaining palatable to the self. In Thomas More’s case, a schism is created whereby the authentic self which incorporates in the communal Catholic body is preserved behind the mask of the accommodating public man. Once the Reformation renders More’s Catholic institutions inaccessible, some protestants like William Tyndale submit themselves instead to the truth of the written Word, an obeisance that will be held privately and internally beyond the reach of the king, while others, such as Thomas Wyatt, turn to the creation of a complex identity in which the sexual appetites of the manly courtier are expressed publically through the rhetoric of gentleness and duty. With such options available to aristocrats like More and Wyatt being out of reach for commoners, Shakespeare’s adoption of the stoic response manifests as a dispersal of the self through the work—a decentering of desire and impulse which becomes an always already elided self. Indeed, Greenblatt observes that the internal reorganization of the stoic subject "always involves some experience of threat, some effacement or undermining, some loss of self."21

This Early Modern presentation of the self civically and personally takes its blueprint from the identities manufactured through rhetoric by statesmen of the first century BCE, particularly Cicero. Conceptions of interiority that evolve through rhetorical construction, in a sense a declamatory self, most easily lend themselves to examination in Julius Caesar (1599). Gary Wills’s Rome and Rhetoric (2011) is a useful starting point in this regard, and although Wills does not directly address how rhetoric and autonomous interiority are related, it is a relatively short step from one to the other, for what is rhetoric if not the subject’s attempt to remake through language the reality without into the shape of the reality within? From here it is a

21 Ibid., 9.
further short step to the beginnings of a performative self in which both the inner world and the outer respond to each other dialectically.

Cicero’s structures are molded by his involvement in the Catiline crisis during the year of his consulship, 63 BCE, and of course the advent of the first triumvirate in 60 BCE, which would lead to his year-long exile in 58. Stoicism and skepticism are certainly features of his response, but as Mays and Wisse point out in their 2001 translation of Cicero’s 55 BCE work, the *De oratore*, produced when Cicero realizes that he is still under the power of the triumvirs despite his return from exile, neither philosophy nor rhetoric alone can produce the ideal man, but rather the two in combination. Cicero therefore proposes the perfect orator as one who eschews slavish devotion to the rigid rules of Aristotelian rhetoric in favor of a man of universal knowledge, including physics, dialectic, psychology, and political theory. This is perhaps because the political landscape of Rome has become such a morass of entrenched power structures during his lifetime that the high ideals of the Republic by themselves no longer obtain, and only through the praxis of the orator who understands the complexities of this pre-imperial phase in Roman history can moral and ethical values stand any chance of continuity into the new world order.

A marker of the Early Modern engagement with Ciceronian rhetoric is its borrowing of Roman taxonomy, which was still a live issue in Cicero’s Rome. For example even before the politics of the 50s BCE have taken shape, Cicero is already involved in the ongoing debate as to whether or not rhetoric is an “art.” As May and Wisse explain,

The English word “art” is an unfortunate but unavoidable equivalent to the Greek *technē* (téchnη) and the Latin *ars* and covers a concept central to much ancient thinking about systematic teaching. Most of the sophists in Plato’s day and most of the later rhetoricians indeed advertised their rules as being an “art.” A discipline was regarded as an art in this sense if it was a systematic body of real

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knowledge that constituted a reliable guide for attaining the desired practical results – in the case of rhetoric, persuasion of an audience…. If [rhetoric is an art, Plato] argues, the knowledge on which it is based must necessarily be true, i.e. absolute, “philosophical” knowledge… And since rhetoric is in large part concerned with lawsuits, which involve questions of right and wrong, it must include true knowledge of right and wrong…. Thus philosophical knowledge is central to rhetoric. Without it rhetoric cannot be an art and is morally dangerous. 

However, May and Wisse argue, “Cicero’s demand that the orator should have philosophical knowledge has no moral background.” In a rejection of the Platonic construction indicated here, Cicero’s position is based on his skepticism that a rhetor who does not have knowledge can master the theses at the heart of rhetoric necessary for stirring up an audience through oratorical manipulation of psychology—its part of the ethical branch of philosophy in ancient taxonomy. In fact Cicero focuses more on the orator’s skills as speaker than on the art of the rhetor. Therefore, in the quarrel between philosophers and rhetoricians as to the moral efficacy and practical uses of rhetoric which stretches back to Plato, Cicero adopts a middle ground in which the ideal man “is not a rhetorician-philosopher, but an orator-philosopher.” Such a model provides the framework for the makeup of a Hamlet or a Brutus.

Despite Cicero’s faith in the orator philosopher concept, however, he is acutely aware of the nefarious uses to which rhetorical techniques can be put. The shedding of tears as a marker of emotional authenticity has a long history in Classical literature. Indeed, the crying hero, whose emotional state is not sufficiently credible until his grief, love, or anger is made manifest by watering eyes, is a phenomenon already established in Homeric Greece, as evidenced by the manner in which the death of Patroklus is reported and received:

Antilochus kneeling near, weeping uncontrollably,

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23 Ibid., 23–24.
24 Ibid., 25.
25 Ibid., 20.
26 For a comprehensive listing, see Tears in the Graeco-Roman World, ed. Thorsten Fögen (Walter de Gruyter, 2009).
Clutched Achilles’ hands as he wept his proud heart out –
For fear he would slash his throat with an iron blade.
Achilles suddenly loosed a terrible, wrenching cry
And his noble mother heard him, seated near her father,
The Old Man of the Sea in the salt green depth,
And she cried out in turn. (Il. 18.36–42)27

As crying becomes shorthand for authenticity, the idea that tears are simply a metonym which

can be recreated by the actor’s *techne* [skill], without the need for the concurrent emotional
distress, troubles not only Cicero and Quintilian but comes as a shock to Hamlet:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Is it not monstrous that this player here,} \\
\text{But in a fiction, in a dream of passion,} \\
\text{Could force his soul so to his own conceit} \\
\text{That from her working all the visage wann’d} \\
\text{Tears in his eyes, distraction in his aspect,} \\
\text{A broken voice, and his whole function suiting} \\
\text{With forms to his conceit? And all for nothing! (Ham. 2.2.545–51)}28
\end{align*}
\]

Antony, on the other hand, has already learned this lesson and demonstrates in fictional Rome
the rhetorical creation of identity that his peers in historical Rome warn against: “Bear with me. / My heart is in the coffin there with Caesar, / And I must pause till it come back to me.” Antony’s ersatz tears allow 2 PLEBIAN to observe, “Poor soul, his eyes are red with weeping,” which in turn provides 3 PLEBIAN with the short hop to the conclusion that “There’s not a nobler man in Rome than Antony” (3.2.107–117).29

Cicero’s ideas on philosophy and rhetoric are in part a product of the various crises that
rocked the republic during his own lifetime. It is for this reason that he chooses the dialogue
form for the *De oratore*, in which his primary interlocutors are Crassus and Scaevola, two of young Cicero’s mentors and men who are themselves concerned in the dialogue with the threat

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27 Unless otherwise indicated, this and all subsequent quotations are from the Fagles translations of *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* (Viking Penguin, 1990; 1996).
to the republic of the War of the Allies (90–88 BCE), a thinly veiled analog to the contemporary threat to the republic in the form of Caesar, Pompey, and Crassus. The effectiveness of this more flexible, philosophy-based oratorical construction of self is born to an extent from Cicero’s first-hand experience in the courts and the senate, demonstrated in his defense of the actor Roscius against charges of fraud. Anne Duncan addresses Cicero’s role in the famous case as part of her argument for a complex picture of class-based identity in Rome, defined in part by rhetorical moves that were constantly in tension with the histrionics of the stage actor—especially the tragedian. She presents a comparative case study of Roman attitudes to the comic actor Roscius and the tragedian Aesopus, both of whom seem to have been equally popular in that they left similar wealth in their wills. However, it is Roscius that is the favored of the two, originally a free Roman who is knighted by Sulla and ultimately defended in a fraud case by Cicero’s Pro Roscio Comoedo. The orator clears Roscius of wrongdoing by counterintuitively attributing to his opponent the stereotypes of the actor: deceptive mimesis, moral ambiguity, and dissembling.

The co-opting of Ciceronian oratorical practices by stage actors becomes a source of concern for Quintilian a century later when in the Institutio oratoria he presents the actor as the orator’s negative image, against which the orator must always be on guard. Indeed, Quintilian complains that there is little to tell the courtroom apart from the stage—the histrionics of Aesopus being equally effective in both. Thus, the blurring of public life and the dramatic imitation of that public life is already an established concern to Romans well before Seneca produces his tragedies in the first century. Given Quintilian’s admiration of Cicero and the younger philosopher’s importance to the spread of humanism through the Renaissance, it is

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reasonable to suppose that Shakespeare and his contemporaries received the Ciceronian philosopher-orator ideal with an associated dose of this Quintilianian suspicion.

A useful exemplar of the ways in which the Renaissance mind perceived this difference between the Ciceronian orator-philosopher and the rhetoric in the Greek style is provided by Wills’ detailed analysis of Brutus and Antony’s orations in *Caesar* 3.2.31 As Wills points out, far from being an inept speech in comparison to Antony’s, as it has been traditionally regarded, Brutus’s appeal is in fact a highly rhetorized discourse which densely layers both Roman and Greek *techne*. While Wills does not state as much explicitly, the implication of his argument is that Brutus presents a logical case for his right to ethical decision-making as an autonomous subject, but Antony’s more Ciceronian oratorical utility manipulates the psychology of the subjective interior (as Shakespeare understands it) far more effectively. Brutus makes a reasoned rhetorical argument for who he is and what he stands for, but Antony oratorically performs identity itself in Ciceronian terms.

IV. The Emotional Self

Chapter two examines the emotional interior of the Early Modern tragic hero, its basis in the models of Greek epic and the significance placed on emotional states by both Classical and Renaissance culture. Three key texts in this area are David Konstan’s *The Emotions of the Ancient Greeks: Studies in Aristotle and Classical Literature* (2001), *Reading the Early Modern Passions: Essays in the Cultural History of Emotion*, edited by Gail Kern Paster, Katherine Rowe and Mary Floyd Wilson (2004), and especially Leonard Muellner’s theory of divine rage, *The Anger of Achilles* (1996). The tragedy that provides the most fertile ground for this topic is

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self-evidently the one with the most emotionally febrile protagonist. *Hamlet* (1600) provides not only the hero in question, but the Prince of Denmark conveniently has a strong tendency to conceive of emotional states in mythological terms, from Gertrude’s Niobian tears to King Hamlet’s front of Jove, not to mention the generous deployment of Latin names, Lucianus, Cornelius, Reynaldo, Barnardo, Franciscus, Horatio, Claudius and so forth, implying that Shakespeare had the ancients very much at the forefront of his attention during its composition.

Konstan’s study of Greek emotional categories suggests that our willingness to regard ancient emotional states as concentric with our own is in fact presumptive. To take one example, “shame” in Western culture has come to be seen as the poor relation of “guilt,” in that shame responds to the judgment of others, unlike guilt, which responds to interior notions of morality and conscience. For this reason shame has been regarded by some psychologists as a child’s emotion, developmentally predating the superego formation which makes guilt possible. This ability to respond to the more socially desirable guilt instead of shame is therefore sometimes regarded as a marker of the modern autonomous self. By contrast, so this line of argument goes, the heroic warrior societies of Homeric Greece are primitive because they are shame cultures.  

Indicative of this is the fact that Classical Greek has been traditionally regarded as a language lacking separate words for “shame” and “guilt,” *aidōs* and *aiskhnē* being translated interchangeably as “shame.” Konstan contends, however, through a detailed etymological analysis of Aristotle’s use of both words in *Nichomachean Ethics*, that the ancient concept of shame was a larger entity than that described by our contemporary usage.

> ‘If shamelessness [*anaiskhunía*] is a bad thing and also not feeling *aidōs* [to mé *aideisthai*] at doing shameful things, then is it not more honorable for someone who does such things to feel *aiskhnē* [*aiskhunēsthai*],’ that is, after the deeds

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have been done. In this passage, *aidós* is clearly understood to inhibit bad behavior, while *aiskhunē* reflects back on it with regret. In other words “shame” (*aidós*) is an emotion while “sense of shame” (*aiskhunē*) is more like an ethical trait. Konstan observes, “Shame arises not at the contemplation of loss of honour in the abstract, but from specific acts or events that bring about disgrace.” Aristotle describes the examples of such acts as ills: “If shame is as we have defined it, then it follows that we feel shame for those kinds of ills that seem disgraceful… for example throwing away one’s shield or fleeing, for they come from cowardice.”

By way of example, Konstan examines the incident in Sophocles’s *Philoctetes* in which Odysseus convinces young Neoptolemos to return with him the deserted island of Lemnos where the Greek armada, at Odysseus’s insistence, marooned Philoctetes because of the smell from an infected snakebite on his foot – itself a punishment by the gods for inadvertently stepping on ground sacred to Chryse. On Lemnos Philoctetes sustains himself by hunting with his bow—a gift from Herakles. In the meantime, under torture, Helenus has revealed to the Greeks that the bow of Herakles must be used against Troy if the walls are to fall. Since Odysseus knows Philoctetes hates him, he persuades Neoptolemos to insinuate himself into Philoctetes’s confidence so that he can steal the bow by saying he too hates Odysseus for taking the armor of his father, Achilles, which rightly belongs to Neoptolemos. The uneasy Neoptolemos asks Odysseus, “Don’t you think it’s shameful [*aiskhron*] to tell lies?” Odysseus responds that lies are justified when survival depends on them: “No - not if lying is a means to safety…. / When to act means to gain advantage, there’s no need for scruples” (*Phil.* 338 [120-21,123]).

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33 Ibid., 95.
34 Ibid., 101.
35 Qtd. in Konstan 101.
rhetorical question to the boy, “Isn’t it sweet to gain victory?” (*Phil.* 337 [90]), Odysseus means by “gain advantage” in the conquering of Troy, but we can infer that his individual survival operates by the same values since he attempted to avoid being drafted into the war in the first place through the deception of feigning madness.

At the moment Neoptolemos steals the bow, he feels shame at his own treachery, which in turn he interprets as a character flaw, but this judgment of his own conduct as an ill appears only in front of Philoctetes who also believes lying is shameful:

> Having sworn to bring me home,  
> [the son of Achilles] instead drives me to Troy;  
> Having offered his right hand in pledge,  
> He has seized and holds onto my bow,  
> The sacred bow of Herakles, son of Zeus! (*Phil.* 373 [1008–1012])

He begs Neoptolemos, “Have mercy on me, child - by the gods!— / and do not prove yourself an object of shame among men / for having deceived me” (375 [1050–53]). What is important here is that Neoptolemos feels no shame in front of Odysseus who operates by a different moral code than the wounded archer. Shame for Neoptolemos becomes illness that manifests only in the gaze of “a morally serious witness” [Philoctetes in this case] and which can only be cured by reparation: “I… seized a man by shameful deception and treachery…. I acquired this bow shamefully and unjustly…. I committed a shameful error and I shall try to undo it.”37 Thus, a valence that is no longer available to us in quite the same way appears. Unlike modern guilt, which is generated and directed by a moral interior, Classical shame shares with modern shame the quality of generation by the exterior gaze of certain others under contextually specific circumstances, but unlike modern shame, which leaves the subject largely unchanged, if

37 Qtd. in Konstan 108.
temporarily humiliated, Classical shame subtly interacts with the psychological notion of self and forces the subject to look inward.

If, as the example of shame suggests, Hellenic culture in some sense “feels differently” from the ways in which we today feel, what then do Early Modern writers think they are experiencing when they borrow Classical emotions to express their own interior states? Central to *Hamlet*, for example, is the prince’s emotional response in failing his filial duty to revenge. Although by the end of 4.4 he does allow for the idea that thinking too precisely on the event is one part wisdom to three parts coward, his puzzlement in the fourth soliloquy is no longer satisfied by such obvious answers. His earlier contention that his inaction is simply the result of being a “pigeon-livered” John-a-dreams who “lacks gall” no longer seems valid—especially after he has already dispatched Polonius in his misfire at the king. It would seem an obvious time for Hamlet to express guilt at his lack of resolve, but he does not apply the word “guilt” to himself—only “shame”:

> How stand I then
> That have a father kill’d, a mother stain’d,
> Excitements of my reason and my blood,
> And let all sleep, while to my shame I see
> The immanent death of twenty thousand men…. (4.4.56–60)

The question arises then as to why Hamlet should feel shame rather than the more Christian notion of guilt at his inaction in the face of Fortinbras’s army marching to its fate. No one is watching him (the absent presence of the [ghostly] father notwithstanding), so why he should conceptualize his emotional state as shame is unclear. Of course he may be responding to the mute judgment on him of the twenty thousand which is forcing him down a path his moral compass is telling him to avoid. This, however, seems at odds with his observation a few lines earlier that obliviousness to moral and intellectual duty is bestial. That again sounds more like
guilt than shame. One possibility is that, in this heroic call-to-arms speech delivered in front of a martial array, the prince has in mind heroic “shame” closer to the Homeric notion of *aiskhunê*. Hamlet is referring to a character flaw, an illness in the self, which manifests in the gaze of the morally serious witness who is in this case—Hamlet being possessed of a modern psychology—himself.

Konstan is helpful here again in his discussion of Thucydides, who “contrasts offences against the law, which result in punishment, with those against customs, which engender *aiskhunê*. But *aiskhunê* is also ‘a restrictive virtue,’ and in this connotation it means ‘shame… or honour in the sense of respecting one’s commitments at all cost, principledness… and at times almost heroism.’” This line of thought makes sense of Hamlet’s concluding exhortation in the 4.4 soliloquy whereby, instead of the self-esteem degradation which is the outcome of modern shame, this sense of *aiskhunê* emboldens the prince to heroic action: “O, from this time forth / My thoughts be bloody or be nothing worth” (4.4.64–65). Hamlet’s *aiskhunê* is doubly useful in that it not only allows him to find his heroic principles, it forces him to seek a cure for the illness within through reparation, just as Neoptolemos must repair his own flaw by returning the bow of Herakles to Philoctetes.

As this brief overview of some of Konstan’s ideas for establishing the differential field between Classical *pathōs* and modern passions demonstrates, the intricacies of understanding emotion in Classical antiquity depend to a great extent on grasping the philological nuances of Greek and Latin, and the subtler the emotion, the greater the pressure on the terms which describe them. This, taken together with the fact that the Prince of Denmark presents the special case of a character largely dominated primarily by two emotions, melancholy and anger, implies

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38 Konstan 94–95.
that the most fruitful approach is to narrow the focus. For that reason, the second chapter examines Hamlet’s rage and how it can be seen to operate as a framework for the structuring of the play in the same way that the rage of Achilles structures the *Iliad*.

V. The Theatrical Self

The emotion-fueled theatrics of *Hamlet* meets the stoicism of Shakespeare’s Ciceronian Romans in the works of Lucius Annaeus Seneca, whose works underpin the examination of dramatically constructed identity in chapter three, although Seneca’s brand of stoicism is quite different from that of Cicero, and his tragedies do not uniformly present stoicism as the best response to all situations: fury can also be an effective way to restore order or at least seal the breech in the self caused by injury. Having said that, chapter three explores the ways in which stoicism and murderous anger can be viewed as two sides of a coin rather than two ends of a spectrum. Plato states that *thymos* (sometimes *thumos*), which he defines as that part of the spirit associated with shame, indignation, pride, and the need for recognition, is essential to autonomy because it is *thymos* rather than intellect which drives moral decision-making. However, given the constitution of *thymos*, morality is being powered by that part of the soul which is coincidentally the most acutely sensitive to injury and insult. In this way *thymos* can be likened to a firework’s ability to produce design or destruction, dependent upon how the spark is applied or misapplied. Classical societies’ engagement with this duality is at the heart of their tragedies and epics, as it is later to become the favored topic of the Renaissance tragedians, and it marks the emergence point of the performative self.
In his 1985 book, *Renaissance Tragedy and the Senecan Tradition*, Gordon Braden proposes three conditions which thematize the environment in which the performative self is likely to emerge in the revenge tragedy genre:

- The avenger’s mortal mistake [is] his loss of faith in divine providence and correlative surrender (under the corrupting influence of Seneca) to the demands and enticements of the *thymos*.
- The vengeance to which the hero descends is no longer morally superior to what is being avenged.
- [T]he moral rhetoric…is overwhelmingly on the side of revenge and directed against an inactivity for which no good name is forthcoming.\(^{39}\)

When the *thymos* experiences trauma, containment of the injury becomes intolerable—the truth will out, and the outing will invariably manifest as rage. Once this rage state has been attained, the subject publically and privately rehearses the injury in a series of hyperbolic monologues designed to exhort the self into action. Where the three conditions Braden identifies are not met, the injured party’s angry response is useful, lauded even, and typically results in epic rather than tragedy. Achilles’s success in battle is largely the result of his rage, and in fact the *Iliad* advertises as much in its first line. The warrior proceeds to show his injury by the various performances called for at each part of the narrative: the moper, the wailer, the berserker, and so forth. However, when these three tragic conditions exist during or around the point of injury, performance attains the manic urgency we see in Seneca and from there (mediated by Mediaeval Christian tropes) in Marlowe, Kyd, Shakespeare, and their contemporaries.

Stripped of belief that any kind of divine justice is forthcoming, elevating the injury to the level of a crime against nature through apocalyptic rhetoric, the hero is ready to perform as the avenging son, the jilted wife, etc. While Hamlet is able at various moments to elevate himself to suitable levels of rage through self-exhorting rhetoric, he initially fails to perform as the

avenger. This is perhaps in part because his humanist psychology predisposes in him an
adversity to subjects who are able to lower their own morality to the same level as the object of
vengeance. Symptomatic of this is the way he misremembers Pyrrhus as “the Hyrcanian beast.”
The description of Pyrrhus as a Hyrcan tiger appears nowhere in Aeneid - the connection is
purely Hamlet’s own invention, based presumably on a misremembering of Dido’s accusation to
Aeneas that he is unfeeling: “Hyrcanian tigresses / Tendered their teats to you” (4.506–07). As
such, it speaks to Hamlet’s initial attitude that the ferocity of revengers is bestial.

The textual modes of transmission from ancient to Early Modern in this section of the
argument are grounded in the fact that Elizabethan dramatists had access to Jasper Heywood’s
1559 translation of Troas and his 1560 Thyestes, as well as John Studley’s 1566 translation of
Agamemnon, discussed at some length by Ker and Winston in the commentary to their recent
reproduction of these plays, Elizabethan Seneca. The degree to which Seneca directly
influences the Elizabethans remains an area of critical contestation, since the extent to which he
was read in Elizabethan schoolrooms remains arguable. Middleton’s Revenger’s Tragedy (c.
1606) and Webster’s The Duchess of Malfi (1612) owe much to the spectacle of Senecan
tragedy, but more importantly, these two plays follow Seneca’s strategy for dealing with the
caprice of an imperial court and a godless, chaotic universe by formulating a theatrically
constructed identity which can meet the pressures of the unpredictable exterior while protecting
the authenticity of the stoic inner world. Even if the chaos of the court of King James was in
many ways no less corrupt or inherently theatrical than that of Elizabeth, the mythos of the latter,

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41 James Ker and Jessica Winston, Elizabethan Seneca: Three Tragedies (Modern Humanities Research
Association, 2012).
intentionally and accidentally propagated by James, worked on the public imagination to much the same effect.

VI. The Historical Self

As the final strand of this discussion, chapter four takes a Foucauldian view of the subject as a node at the intersection of historical events. Cassius famously points out to Brutus that the weight of expectation presses down on him because his illustrious ancestor drove the Tarquin from Rome, and thus Brutus has an identity forced on him by a history which doubles as his own genealogy. Indeed, as Mario Erasmo explains, the city of Rome understood its own history as a tapestry of individual accomplishments by members of noble families, and these were celebrated in the *fabula praetexta*, dramas commissioned to reenact an individual’s life. The *praetexta*, named for the *toga praetexta* worn by Roman magistrates, are marked by varying degrees of separation in time from their subject and the occasions for which they were commissioned. Republican plays tend to celebrate the mythologized lives of semi-legendary figures from Latin history, the *Brutus*, the *Decius* and so on, while the triumphal plays mark the defeat of a tribe or country. Imperial plays, on the other hand, frequently criticize imperial tyranny, often by allusion to offstage current events or by alluding to earlier Greek historical plays. Erasmo says, “The breakdown of the illusion between the stage and the audience leads to the framing and perception of historical events in terms of previously produced tragedies, thereby contributing to the awareness of the theatricality of contemporary offstage events.”42 An example of this phenomenon is demonstrated by the mode of subjectivity implied by *praetexta* which feature contemporary figures and—more conjecturally—*praetexta* performed at funerals. During such a

42 Mario Erasmo, *Roman Tragedy: Theatre to Theatricality* (U of Texas Press, 2004) 68.
event, the corpse itself might be seated on the stage while an actor wearing a death mask of the deceased recreates the high points of his life, the individual thus becoming a spectator at his own funeral.

If Roman attitudes to seeing their legendary forefathers depicted on stage cannot be known with certainty, it seems safe to assume that such plays came with the security of distance in time and familiarity of plot, Erasmo suggests. More useful as an indicator of the Roman mindset is the way Romans received praetexta commissioned by still living subjects. In June 43 BCE, Cicero received a letter from C. Asinius Pollio, in which Pollio gives an account of sitting through a performance of L. Cornelius Balbus’s Iter (Journey). The play seems to have been written by Balbus himself and tells of his penetration into Pompey’s camp in 49 BCE, a year before Pompey’s defeat at Pharsalus, in an attempt to convince L. Lentulus that he should switch allegiance to Caesar. Pollio notes to Cicero that Balbus, seated in the audience, watching himself portrayed onstage, wept as he saw the events recreated, using the phrase flevit memoria rerum gestarum commotus [he wept, deeply moved by the memory of his achievements]. Erasmo observes that the word commotus implies “an excessive reaction seen to draw attention to himself.” The adjective, loosely translated here as “moved,” can also be translated as “deranged,” “disordered,” “insane.” It is unclear what discomfits Pollio: Balbus’s excessive pride, exaggerating his own role in the events perhaps. Erasmo notes that it is clear from the context and phrasing of the letter that Pollio spent as least as much time watching Balbus watching himself as he did watching the actor playing Balbus.

What Erasmo calls “the semiotics of competing realities in praetexta” create an even greater cognitive dissonance in the case of praetexta that may have been performed at funerals. It

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43 Trans. Erasmo.
44 Ibid., 74.
was already commonplace for a deceased nobleman to be seated upright in the audience while his eldest son discoursed on his virtues from the rosta, but even more interesting is the fact that other family members surrounding the corpse in the audience wore masks of previously deceased ancestors. In this way the dead man becomes not only a spectator at his own funeral but joins a pantheon of immortals making up the audience around him. Polybius writing in 2 BCE says of the practice,

> They all ride in chariots preceded by the fasces, axes and other insignia by which the different magistrates are wont to be accompanied according to the respective dignity of their offices of state held by each during his life; and when they arrive at the rosta they seat themselves in a row on ivory chairs. There could not easily be a more ennobling spectacle for a young man who aspires to fame and virtue. For who would not be inspired by the sight of the images of men renowned for their excellence, all together as if alive and breathing? (Hist. 6.53.1–10)\(^{45}\)

A variation on this is the practice of mime actors in the funeral procession imitating the dead man’s bearing and carriage while wearing a mask of the deceased. Erasmo raises the intriguing question as to whether the mime left the procession to appear on the stage at the funeral ludi or whether a second actor played the deceased onstage while the first actor represented him in the audience, either or both in sight of the actual deceased sitting on the stage or in the audience. However it was arranged, the living members of the audience are forced to choose between competing realities—the performed reality on the rosta, in which life and death are blended together, versus the acts of daily lived experience.

There are two works which bookend the revenge tragedy genre and are in direct line of sight of the fabula praetexta: in its staging, Thomas Kyd’s 1580s play The Spanish Tragedy and, in its understanding of the psychological interior, Shakespeare’s Coriolanus (c. 1605–1608). Kyd’s audience finds itself encountering the same challenge to perception, the same

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contaminatio of reality which the Roman audience does. Specifically, the semiotics of its spectator position is usurped by various onstage audiences, beginning with the deceased Don Andrea taking his seat alongside Revenge to watch the production. This immediately calls into question the issue of whose reality is the more valid, given that Proserpine has sent Andrea back from the underworld to witness his revenge enacted. In a sense the play onstage is not for Kyd’s audience but for Don Andrea in much the same way that the praetexta is primarily for the corpse in the case of funerals or the subject-protagonist in the case of still-living noblemen.

Similarly, in Coriolanus the general is asked to stand and give witness to an audience onstage that stands in for the actual audience offstage, thus providing the real audience members in the theater with decisions to make about their role as viewers and, indeed, to further consider the appropriation of their own reality by that of the stage. Just as the offstage audience has expectations about their depiction onstage, the onstage audience needs to see itself reflected in Martius’s performance of his own accomplishments, which Romans understood to be the history of themselves. What Martius perceives as his authentic, autonomous interior, therefore, is interpretable by the people of Rome as a Foucauldian node at the intersection of martial achievement, family expectation, Roman duty, and patrician loyalty. However, the play interrogates what happens when the subject is asked to make the interior exterior—to place it on view through a rhetorical performance which is at odds with the individual’s own sense of autonomy. That which Martius perceives to be inside of him does not match the expectations of the people and therefore cannot be revealed. This mismatch between inner life and outer expectation puts Martius in a Heideggerian bind, whereby his only options are to give Rome, through a dissembling, theatrical performance, the heroic view of itself that it expects or to be true to an authentic interior which claims personal history for the self.
An examination of Martius’s psychological interior in *Coriolanus* implies an engagement with Plutarch, given his importance to Early Modern conceptions of history. The idea of individual identity constructed on the deeds of heroes, which taken together over time form the history and identity of a whole culture, is at the heart of Plutarch’s project in the *Parallel Lives*. Plutarch’s attempt to match notable Greeks with Roman leaders and generals fails in part because, as Robert Lamberton observes, his goal is not to see parallels but to make them. Plutarch seeks to reify his own Greek culture in a formulation that can match the undeniable Roman political and military achievements which, as a member of an occupied people, are his current, hard reality. What is important here is not that the parallels never really match, which is why they are rarely studied in their original pairs today, but rather that Plutarch feels the same need as the plebeians in his own account of Martius (“Marcius” in Plutarch)\(^47\); that is, to narcissistically see his own life referents come from a culture worthy of him. The failure of those in power to recognize their duty to share the raw materials on which that cultural identity can be built is Martius’s great flaw:

> For he was a man to full of passion and choller, and to muche geven to over selfe will and opinion, as one of highe minde and great corage, that lacked the gravity and affabilitie that is gotten with judgement of learning and reason, which only is to be looked for in a gouvernour of state: and that remembred not how wilfulness is the thing of the world which a gouvernour of a common wealth for pleasing should shone, being that which Plato called solitarines. As in the ende, all men that are willfully geven to a selfe opinion and obstinate minde, and who will never yeld to others reason, but their owne, remaine without companie, and forsaken of all men. (*Life of Caius Martius Coriolanus* 160)\(^48\)

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\(^{47}\) Plutarch uses the correct *Marcius*, but Shakespeare follows North’s *Martius*, except for a likely compositing error in the Folio, where *Marcus* is used. See Philip Brockbanks introduction to the Arden *Coriolanus* (1998) 8.

Such observations by Plutarch constitute the opposite tendency to that of the authors of the *praetexta*. If individual lives are to be rendered into drama for the didactic edification of future generations and the creation of a shared cultural conception of historical identity, a conscious act of mythologizing those lives is being undertaken. Plutarch frequently works in an opposite fashion, “to make these figures on the borders of myth look like the stuff of authentic, rationalized history (*Thes.* 1.5, ‘to purge them of the mythical and make them look like history’), and a list of scholarly authorities [at the end of the *Lives*] makes the whole enterprise look more sober and respectable.”\(^{49}\) In many ways Plutarch’s mode of composition in this regard is an aid rather than a hindrance because tracking those elements of distortion that Shakespeare chooses to suppress or further exaggerate, as this chapter will attempt to do, says much about his own agenda in presenting selfhood, and this chapter.

The various extents to which Renaissance tragedians could have and did read Latin and Greek, of course, remains highly contentious, even after decades of research and debate. Extensive arguments for and against Shakespeare’s purportedly “small Latine and lesse Greeke,” for example, have been made by Charles Martindale, Stuart Gillespie, Martin Silk and others, therefore, such theories will be not rehearsed in depth in the chapters that follow. However, given that the use of Classical primers and readers in Elizabethan schoolrooms is now well established, as are many of the English translations that were available to playwrights, the conduits through which tragedians received literature from antiquity is a consideration in all four areas outlined here.

\(^{49}\) Christopher Pelling, *Plutarch and History* (Duckworth, 2002) 368.
Chapter 1

The Power of Speech To Stir Men’s Blood

I. Shakespeare’s Cicero

Shakespeare’s mode of reception of Classical authors, Cicero in particular, remains highly speculative, and if the lines of sight to the texts of antiquity in the Tudor schoolroom, let alone Shakespeare’s own adult bedtime reading, cannot be drawn with any certainty, how much less so can we know what he made of those works he did read. When the hurly-burly’s done, all that can truly be known is what Cicero actually writes and the uses to which Shakespeare puts that writing. If, as Charles Martindale and Gary Wills suggest, the mode of articulation invented for the characters in *Julius Caesar* is intensely Ciceronian, then it follows that Shakespeare is molding his characters out of the rhetorical, oratorical, and philosophical tropes that he sees in works such as the *De officiis*, the *Tusculanae disputationes*, and the text John Brinsley mentions in the very first line of his 1612 *Ludus Literarius* (or *The Grammar Schoole*), the *De oratore*. Certainly, in his schoolroom studies, Shakespeare would have seen that the great orator was able to use rhetoric to construct a persona, not just defensively to protect the inner self but also offensively to create an identity for others, in the law courts, in the senate, or on the stage. Equally, he learned from Cicero that Classical realpolitik, much like its Renaissance counterpart, would push back against rhetorical construction and would frequently have to be accommodated.

This chapter begins by tracing the influence of competing theories of textual affect on Shakespeare’s development but takes the position that, certainly when he is a young man,
Classical works are heavily implicated in Shakespeare’s understanding of identity, perception, and selfhood. Our definition of “self” in literary studies of the last 30 or so years—at least as it relates to the Early Modern period—has been heavily influenced by the New Historicists, who have argued for a model of the psyche which perceives itself as having an autonomous ability to act separately from the expectations and demands of social role forced upon it from the external world, even if this perception is a myth the self embraces out of necessity. Within limits, this “acting self” has the freedom to fashion a public persona which shields the interior persona from public view. More recent scholarship in the field of Classical studies has borrowed this definition of self and has begun to reconsider ancient writers in light of it, and it is the working definition which will be understood here, with the modification that the strictures of social role in Roman society exerted greater pressure on autonomy even than did Renaissance culture on the early Modern self. The remainder of the chapter examines what Shakespeare made of Cicero’s project to establish the art of rhetoric as being a civic necessity equal to military accomplishment in terms of prestige and, in so doing, raise his own novus homo status to equal that of his patrician contemporaries who had the luxury of noble heritage.

Cicero did not have an open field in his project to match military and familial accomplishment with rhetoric, in that certain modes, epideixis (praise and blame) and humor for example, were regarded by the Roman elite as “feminizing”¹ and consequently shameful. Such limits on the rhetorical modes that the ruling classes would condone were rooted in Roman

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¹ The anachronistic use of the word “feminizing” is borrowed from Dugan and other critics and historians of Roman paternalistic culture and attitudes who themselves take it from Classical authors (see 38.2: Tacitus). It appears here, as it does in the works of those commentators, typically as shorthand for such elements of rhetoric and conduct which the ruling Roman class viewed as being in some way antithetical to masculine Roman values. In rhetorical terms, it frequently indicates Roman attitudes to Greek tropes, many of which were regarded with derision as overly ornate and not in keeping with Roman standards of (masculine) propriety.
anxieties about presentation of the masculine self, not just in an abstract sense but corporeally.

Tacitus records that Cicero was frequently accused of effeminacy in his oratorical style, which in Roman rhetorical theory was implicated in the language of the body: “rurusque Ciceronem a Calvo quidem male audisse tamquam solutum ete enrve, a Bruto autem, ut ipsius verbis utar, tamquam ‘fractum atque elumbem’ [Cicero again was slightly spoken of by Calvus as ‘loose and nerveless,’ and by Brutus, to use his own words, as ‘languid and effeminate.’]” (Dialogus 18).² The claims and counterclaims in the language Tacitus records here speak to the deep-seated anxiety about the signification of body parts which permeates the language of Roman rhetoric.

John Dugan points out,

_Enervis_ is often translated as ‘nerveless, feeble, languid’. Yet _nervous_, in its singular, literally, ‘sinew’, could refer to the penis; the plural could also have this meaning, or, more generally, ‘masculinity’. In Roman rhetorical theory the more literal sense of ‘sexual power, virility’ (_OLD_ 6b) lies behind the metaphorical sense of ‘literary power, talents’ (_OLD_ 7b) and ‘strength of mind, energy’ (_OLD_ 8).³

Shakespeare’s awareness of Roman semiotics is reified in Cassius’s fears about the implications of inaction, phrased in terms that Cicero would have well understood: “Let [the lion in the Capitol] be who it is: for Romans now / Have thews and limbs like to their ancestors: / But woe the while, our fathers’ minds are dead, / And we are governed with our mothers’ spirits: / Our yoke and sufferance show us womanish” (_JC_ 1.3.80–84). Cassius implies a division here between masculine intent and a rhetoric of masculinity which even Caska speaks: “Be factious for redress of all these griefs / And I will set this foot of mine as far / As who goes farthest” (1.3.117–20). In one way this is an anti-Ciceronian conception that recognizes the limits of

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rhetoric as an agent of change and is a motif that Shakespeare will return to in the tragedies, in particular, *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* (“I dare do all that may become a man; / Who dares do more is none” (*Mac.* 1.7.47–48)).

In the face of such an intractably male semiotic system, both in Renaissance England and late republican Rome, Shakespeare’s reluctance to assign the monarch’s voice anything less than a clean masculinity may seem a squeamish accommodation. Cicero was well aware of the masculine/feminine rhetorical dialectic and often used it to his advantage by projecting it on to others. By comparing Mithridates to Medea in his argument that Pompey should be sent against him, Cicero “can exploit long-standing prejudices about Eastern effeminacy, and suggest that Mithradates is, like Medea, sly and deceitful. It strips him of any heroic characteristics.”

Similarly, he has Strabo speak for humor and has Crassus validate the technique in the *De oratore* of 55, but despite such occasional dalliances with such transgressive rhetorical modes, by the time of his later work, the *De officiis* in 44, Cicero seems to have settled on the tragic rhetorical mode as the safest option. The power inherent in the feminizing trope, highlighted by Cicero’s care in negotiating it, is certainly a feature Shakespeare recognizes and seizes upon, deploying it to great effect in his plays, especially *Julius Caesar*.

II. Cicero in Context

Biographical accounts of Cicero’s life over the centuries have inevitably been marked by an ambivalence about his character, actions, and judgement. Certainly, the 58 speeches and 800 or so private letters which have survived him can be used to paint an unflattering picture of a

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glory-seeking self-publicist, and some biographers have done exactly that. However, the greater source of criticism seems to be that historians might have wished Cicero had been more politically consistent, but if the orator had a tendency to ebb and flow with the political tide, it is not unreasonable to see in his pattern of action and inaction a reflection of the intensely volatile times in which he lived. Cicero was not the first novus homo [new man] from Arpinum to seek high office in Rome. Gaius Marius, also from Arpinum, became consul in 107 BCE, the year before Cicero’s birth, and would go on to hold the office a further seven times, the last of these by force. Cicero’s father, although a political outsider, was a wealthy equestrian and would have looked to Arpinum’s favorite son as a model and an inspiration for his own two sons, Marcus and Quintus.

During his school years, young Marcus learned fluent Greek, along with his friend Titus Pomponius, who would later take the cognomen Atticus, in recognition of his love for all things Greek. He fought for Sulla in the civil war against Marius in 88, and in some ways the brutal Sullan proscriptions that followed paved the way for Cicero’s career. Many of the older orators in Rome had been killed in the fighting or executed as enemies of the state, opening the door to younger men, like Cicero’s great rival Quintus Hortensius. Sulla also reconstituted the law courts, which had been largely neglected under Marius, creating opportunities for ambitious young men to make a name for themselves through prosecuting and defending high profile legal cases. Indeed, Cicero quickly made a name for himself in exactly this manner, creating an ever widening circle of social supporters and political clients with each successful legal defense.

His success in the courts enabled him to get his foot on the first rung of the political ladder, becoming quaestor for western Sicily, the breadbasket of Rome, in 76, a position he

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6 The biographical note presented here is adapted from Kathryn Tempest’s biography, Cicero: Politics and Persuasion in Ancient Rome (Continuum, 2011).
handled admirably, earning him lifelong support from the Sicilians. However, despite sending record hauls of grain back to Rome, he was shocked to find himself anonymous on his return, a life lesson that partially accounts for his subsequent reluctance to leave the city: “from then on, I realized the Roman people had deaf ears but sharp and observant eyes… from that day… I have lived in their sight; I have never left the forum.” Cicero was soon able to leverage his legal fame into an aedileship and, two years later, began his campaign for praetor. During this time, Cicero threw his weight behind Pompey’s claim to the command of Roman forces against Mithridates. Indeed, he seems to have seen in Pompey a natural ally, given their similar backgrounds. Having secured praetorship in 66, Cicero set his sights on consul but faced the hurdle of the optimates like Hortensius, Cato, and Lucullus, who regarded new men from provincial towns with suspicion. Cicero’s competition for consul included two nobiles, Gaius Antonius Hybrida and Lucius Sergious Catilina, a politician who could trace his lineage back to the patri, the original hundred senators chosen to advise Romulus. Under investigation for corruption, Catiline, as he was known, bribed his way out of trouble and attempted to further bribe his way to the consulship, but the vast amounts of money he was spending, along with accusations of murder, incest, and corruption, led many in the senate to distrust him.

In an effort to boost his own standing, Cicero delivered the In toga candida (white toga speech) in 64, an invective against Catiline’s crimes, which in part led to his successful election

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7 Tempest 42.
8 aedile: one two Roman magistrates responsible for public buildings, the public games, and the city’s grain supply. The number of aediles was increased to four in the later Republic. The career path of the young Roman noble followed the path of the cursus honorum: quaestor, aedile, curum, praetor, and ultimately consul.
9 praetor: One of two officials assigned the task of leading an army in the field or a magistrate assigned various legal duties.
as co-consul with Hybrida. By late 63 Cicero was able to provide letters to the senate that had been sent to some of Catiline’s friends, warning them to leave the city because Catiline intended to slaughter a variety of his political enemies, including Cicero himself. This, together with the fact that a former centurion and associate of Catiline named Manlius was raising an army near Florence enabled Cicero to convince the senate that Catiline intended to march on Rome.

Alarmed, the senate passed the *senatus consultus ultimum*, requiring the consuls to defend the state and giving them absolute authority to do so. Although everyone knew of Catiline’s guilt, no hard evidence linking him to the letters existed, and he continued to sit in the senate. After the delivery of the first of the *Catilinarians*, Cicero was apparently able to convince Catiline to go into exile, supposedly to Marseilles, but in reality he went to meet Manlius’s forces. The senate responded by sending an army against them, led by Cicero’s co-consul Hybrida, leaving Cicero to successfully root out the remaining conspirators in Rome. It was the great orator’s finest hour, and he was hailed savior of the city. Catiline died in battle and Cicero, fearing a recurrence of the problem, subsequently had his five co-conspirators hanged without trial, a decision that would cause him difficulty later.

At the end of his term in office, Cicero sent Pompey a long letter detailing his exploits and inviting praise, but Pompey’s response was cool, perhaps because he himself wanted to defeat Catiline or perhaps because Cicero had allowed Pompey’s enemy Lucullus to have a triumph for his unsuccessful campaign against Mithridates, Rome’s oldest enemy, against whom Pompey had still not secured a final victory. On his return to Rome in 62, Pompey politically praised Cicero, but in his letter to Atticus, Cicero suggests that Pompey is disingenuous and he seems to feel that the general is awkward to deal with—in many ways, a politically timid man. Symptomatic of his unstable relationship with the general is what has come to be known as “the
togate discourse,” a political faux pas engendered by Cicero’s self-aggrandizing, epic poem, Du consulate suo (On His Consulship), of which fragments remain. Cicero would come under heavy attack and be mocked for the remainder of his career for the line, Cedant arma togae, concedat laurea laudi [Let arms to the toga cede, a soldier’s laurels to glory concede]. Since Pompey had celebrated a triumph the previous year, some of Cicero’s contemporaries saw in this an offensive challenge to his auctoritas. Worse was to come, however.

If his political zenith was the defeat of Catiline, his nadir was the exile of 58, the unlikely origins of which was a prank by Publius Claudius Pulcher (“Clodius”), who attempted to infiltrate the all-female festival of Bona Dea dressed as a woman. Clodius was put on trial for sacrilege by Hortensius, and while he tried to claim he had not been in Rome on the day of the festival, Cicero testified that he himself had seen Clodius. Despite Cicero’s testimony, Clodius was acquitted thanks to bribes on his behalf by Crassus, but Cicero had made a bad enemy. In 59, with help from Caesar and Pompey, Clodius was able to get himself adopted by a plebian family, which in turn allowed him to run for and win office as a tribune of the plebs. Once in office, he proposed a law exiling those who had ever executed a Roman without trial. His bill was passed, and shortly thereafter, on March 20, 58, a second bill officially exiled Cicero and seized his estates. It was only in 57, with the expiration of Clodius’s term in office and the election of ten new tribunes, eight of whom were for Cicero’s recall, that a wave for reinstatement swept through the city. While his return was glorious, Cicero had no choice but to submit to the authority of the triumvirs and operate as their personal orator and defense attorney for the foreseeable future. This submission was a reversal of everything for which Cicero had previously stood, but it would not be for long.
Letters to Atticus from this period show that the staunchly Republican Cicero tacitly supported the Pompeian side, but his distrust of Pompey’s ultimate intentions led him to famously say, “I know who to flee, but I know not whom to follow.”\(^{11}\) In the end, despite courting by Caesar, Cicero opted to join Pompey in Greece. While Cicero initially entertained hopes that Caesar might restore the Republic, the dictator’s increasingly autocratic control quickly disabused him of the notion. After the assassination, Antony seized the opportunity to link Cicero to the conspirators as their spiritual and perhaps even strategic advisor, although he took no personal role in the murder itself. Cicero responded by pinning his hopes on Caesar’s grand-nephew, Octavian, as a young man who might be guided in the direction of republicanism, and to that end delivered the *Philippics* against Antony. Those hopes too were dashed upon the formation of the second triumvirate and the list of proscriptions it subsequently issued, calling for the deaths of Cicero’s entire family. In 43, after an aborted attempt at escape by boat, Cicero returned inland to his villa, where a centurion named Herennius and former military officer named Popillius, chasing the proscription bounty, intercepted his litter. According to Appian, after three blows and a deal of sawing, they were able to remove Cicero’s head and hands, to be sent back to Rome for nailing on the rosta in the Forum (*Civil Wars* IV.4.20).\(^{12}\)

Two years before meeting his own death at the edge of a sword, Cicero suffered his greatest loss, the death of his beloved daughter, Tullia, a month after she gave birth to her second son. In response Cicero retired from public life for a time and moved to his villa at Tusculum, near Antium. There he devoted the mornings with friends to rhetorical and declamatory exercises and the afternoons to philosophical dialogues in the Greek style. From these arguments came his

\(^{11}\) Qtd. in Tempest 163.

book, the Tusculanae disputationes (Tusculan Disputations), in which he asks, “For what is there in [Earthly] natures… which has the power of memory, understanding, or thought? Which can recollect the past, foresee the future, and comprehend the present…? Where, then, is this intellect seated, and of what character is it? Where is your own, and what is its character?” (1.XXVIII).\textsuperscript{13} Cicero attributes the occasion of the disputationes to his desire to redress the relative neglect of Greek philosophy by Romans in favor of rhetoric and civil law, a neglect illustrated by Crassus’s comment that “the little booklet of the Twelve Tables (of laws) alone is weightier in authority and richer in usefulness than the libraries of all the philosophers” (De or. 1.195). The selection of the topoi for the dialogues that result, Cicero goes on to explain, is generated merely from the vagaries of suggestions made by his guests at Tusculum.

While not rejecting the veracity of Cicero’s claims to the genesis of the Disputations, it is difficult not to see in the commonality of the five books, generated over five days of dialogues, the concerns of a grieving father. Thomas Middleton characterizes the books this way:

The first book teaches us how to contemn the terrors of death, and to look upon it as a blessing rather than an evil; The second, to support pain and affliction with a manly fortitude; The third, to appease all our complaints and uneasinesses under the accidents of life; The fourth, to moderate all our other passions; And the fifth explains the sufficiency of virtue to make men happy. (Introduction)\textsuperscript{14}

Echoes of the Disputations appear in both Julius Caesar, written probably in 1599, and Troilus and Cressida, which was entered in the register of the Stationers Company in 1603 but is most likely to have been composed around 1600. With both plays, along with Hamlet in 1600, being written shortly after the death of Hamnet Shakespeare in 1596, it is tempting to imagine one grieving father seeking philosophical consolation by reaching back across the centuries to the

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., Introduction 7.
writings of another in Classical antiquity. While resisting the urge to propose a causal link based on the emotional state of one writer’s draw to another at a fixed point in time, whatever the reason, it seems likely that Shakespeare had Cicero on his mind in the late 1500s, given the subject matter of *Caesar*—a play in large part constructed around rhetorical declamations of duty, principle, and philosophy.

III. Shakespeare’s Sources

The idea that Shakespeare had the *De oratore*, the *Tusculanae disputationes*, or any other Ciceronian text before him as he composed *Caesar* or *Troilus* is disputed by Colin Burrow and others. To an extent Burrow’s view that the plays emerge from a kind of serendipitous jumble of Tudor schoolroom experiences, some planned but most accidental, stands in opposition to the more purposefully Classical Shakespeare proposed here and supported by Charles Martindale. However, given that Martindale and Burrow come at an understanding of Shakespeare’s Classicism from opposite directions, the former by reading backward from outcomes and the latter taking an originary approach starting at the Tudor schoolhouse, a consideration of both directions is useful. Burrow sees the plays as an artifact of the Humanistic education on offer to Tudor schoolchildren. This “misremembering” of *sententiae* and commonplaces, along with the double translation technique employed in Elizabethan classrooms, leads to what Burrow calls a hodge-podge of languages surrounded by a variety of levels of commentary, Plutarch, Greek prose romance, a sprinkling of Lucan, the distiches of Cato, a dash of Homer and perhaps some of Philostratus’ *Imagines*, some of Aphthonius’ dialogues, a little Livy, some Cicero, a bit of Quintilian, all of which would be tumbled together with quotations from Classical authors which were used to illustrate grammatical points in Lily’s Grammar or Erasmus’ educational works.15

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Consequently, “Classics,” according to Burrow, is a term that Shakespeare never used and one that he would not have understood as naming body of authoritative readings. Burrow does, however, contest recent scholarship suggesting Humanistic education of the sixteenth century, with its rote learning and focus on the absolute authority of the schoolmaster and of Latin texts, actually operated to create “docile servants of absolutist regimes,” suggesting instead that there was a balance in Shakespeare’s classroom at the King’s Free Grammar School in Stratford, given that Erasmus encouraged students to debate, for example, democracy versus monarchy and the tyranny of Caesar.\(^{16}\) However, while arguing for this classroom freedom, Burrow does not go far enough in allowing Shakespeare an authoritative command of the authors he must surely have read.

Much of Burrow’s argument comes from a survey of educational treatises used in the Humanist classroom, including Erasmus’s *De Duplici Copia Verborum atque Rerum* (*Concerning the Abundance of Words and Matter*) and the *De Copia* style book - both employed by Dean Colet at the highly regarded St. Paul’s School in London – and, especially, Brinsley’s *Ludus Literarius* (1612), written to assist provincial schoolmasters. Brinsley’s advice, after years of teaching at Ashby-de-la-Zouch school, is to use “Tully [Marcus Tullius Cicero] for prose and Ouid and Virgil for verse.”\(^{17}\) The “double translation,” as Roger Ascham calls it in his 1570 book, *The Schoolmaster*, demanded that older boys translate Latin passages into English and then, with the original removed, translate it back into Latin, maintaining the Latin meter. This leads Burrow to ask, “who now gets to write Virgil, and who now is rewarded for inspired misrememberings of the classics?”\(^{18}\) However, the implication that a Tudor schoolboy might

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\(^{16}\) Ibid., 11.
\(^{17}\) Cited in Burrow 12.
\(^{18}\) Burrow 12.
escape the wrath of the schoolmaster by making up with inventiveness what his translation lacked in accuracy does not easily fit with the account of the young schoolmaster, Spoudeus, in Brinsley’s dialogue on the subject. He complains to the older schoolmaster, Philoponus, “But this [method] I have found also to be full of difficulty, both in the entering, the progress, and also in the end; that my schollers have had more feare in this, then in all the former, and myselfe also driven to more severity: which I have been inforced unto or else I should have done no good at all with the greatest part” (LL 191).19 Thus, Burrow’s conclusion that “Humanist culture may have fostered a cult of memorial reconstruction of classical texts rather than its more professed aim of encouraging their creative imitation,” may correspond more with romantic wish-fulfillment than with the lived reality of the boys in the classroom.20

The misrememberings of double translation stand in opposition to the use of “commonplace books,” encouraged by Erasmus, as a means for gathering knowledge. By this method, schoolboys, under the tutelage of their Humanist schoolmasters, were encouraged to collect passages of classical literature and the proverbial and axiomatic observations of the sententiae, under headings such as “Old Age,” “Time,” or “Sleep.” Burrow notes that, frequently, the dilettantism of many Tudor schoolboys resulted in these books becoming lists of headings rather than lists of passages.21 Nevertheless, the commonplaces would, in theory, provide a ready source of useful passages to be employed by a young Shakespeare when, for example, writing the chronographies in a text such as Venus and Adonis. However, Burrow is overly selective when he points to the Humanist schoolroom strategies that lead to memorial reconstruction, resulting in a picture of Shakespearean Classical reference which consists of little

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20 Burrow 14.
21 Ibid, 18.
more than bits and pieces of partially imagined antiquary allusion and occasional commonplace ornamentation. In reality, Brinsley - whom Burrow holds to be the closest to Shakespeare’s own schoolmaster in experience, geography, and method - reveals that the intent of Humanist education is more far reaching than just the production of commonplace passages and the illumination of Lily’s *Rudimenta Grammatices*. Rather, in the rationale for his curriculum outlined in “The Contents in Generall” of *Ludus Literarius*, Brinsley’s stated goal for the schoolmaster is to make true Latine, and pure Tullies phrase, and to prove it to be true and pure. To doe this in ordinary morall matters, by that time that they have bin but two yeeres in construction…. To take a piece of Tully, or of any other familiar easie Author, Grammatically translated, and in propriety of words, and to turne the same out of the translation into goood Latine, and very neere unto the words of the Authour; so as in most you shall hardly discerne, whether it be the Authour’s Latine, or the scholar’s. (*LL* xiv).

While it is true that Brinsley is outlining a pedagogy, by the time of the first printing of *Ludus Literarius* in 1612, he had been schoolmaster at Ashby de-la-Zouche since 1588, and as such, his book constitutes a record of 25 years teaching Tudor boys in a small market town not unlike Stratford and only 50 miles distant from it.

Brinsley’s assertion that “you shall hardly discerne” whether the versions of Cicero’s Latin produced by the pupils in his charge belong to the boys or to Tully himself does not concur with Burrow’s contention that “Tudor educational ideals and actual practice were almost certainly at odds.” If Brinsley could not always get his pupils to speak exclusively Latin when out of his earshot, still they were expected and presumably able “To make right use of the matter of their Authours; besides the Latine; even from the first beginners; as of *sententiae* and *Confabulatiunulae Puerlies*, Cato, Esop’s *fables*, Tullies *Epistles*, Tully’s *Offices*, Ovid’s

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22 Burrow 13.
Metamorphosis, and so on to the highest.” That “right use,” as Brinsley sees it, is “To help furnish them, with variety of the best morall matter, and with understanding, wisdom and precepts of virtue as they grow; and withal to imprint the Latine so in their minds thereby, as hardly to be forgotten” (LL xvii). Clearly then, if Shakespeare received his education at the Kings Free Grammar School in Stratford, as so many detailed studies on the subject demonstrate that he almost certainly did, 23 having Latin so imprinted in his mind as “hardly to be forgotten,” and, more importantly, having Classical authors held up as the best sources for wisdom and understanding speaks to a different kind of cultural transmission than that proposed by members of the “small Latin” camp.

Somewhat counterintuitively, it is the prodigious Classical learning of Ben Jonson, acquired at the rigorous Westminster School, under the tutelage of the famed William Camden, that Charles Martindale sees highlighting the more sophisticated understanding of Classics evinced by Shakespeare. Martindale criticizes Jonson’s translation of Cicero’s First Catilinarian speech into blank verse in Catiline (1611) because, among other failings, it misses the “hammer-blow of the six-times-repeated nihil, which also articulates the structure.” 24 Thus, Nihilne te noctarum praesidium Palati, nihil Urbis vigiliae, nihil timor populi, nihil concursus bonorum omnium, nihil, hic munitassimus habendi senatus locus, nihil horm ora vultusque moverant?

becomes in Jonson’s version,

Do all the nightly guards kept on the palace,
The city’s watches, with the people’s fears,
The concourse of all good men, this so strong
And fortified seat here of the Senate,
The present looks upon thee, strike thee nothing? 25

25 Qtd. in Martindale 138.
Such ham-fisted translation, claims Martindale, stands in contrast to Shakespeare’s subtler understanding of Cicero’s favored *tricolon crescendo* technique in *Julius Caesar*, which he employs to good effect in Marullus’s first act excoriation of the plebs: “You blocks, you stones, you worse than senseless things.” Marullus continues his Ciceronian tirade in 1.1.39ff., by employing three question, “And do you now,” three clauses with imperatives, rhetorical questions, apostrophes, exclamations and anaphora of “you,” and the balancing of “hard hearts” with “cruel men.” Coupled with these Ciceronian moves, Martindale goes on to observe, “The language, like Cicero’s, generally employs common words, here seasoned by three elegant Latinisms (‘replication,’ ‘concave,’ ‘intermit’) in contrast to the overall simplicity of diction…. This, we may feel is how a Roman orator might speak if he spoke in English. No wonder *Julius Caesar* caused Jonson such irritation.”

IV. The Rhetorically-Fashioned interior

Whatever, Jonson may have thought of Shakespeare’s Ciceronian facility, clearly the Bard had given serious attention to Tully’s rhetorical moves, given his extensive deployment of them in *Julius Caesar*. In the first dialogue of the *Tusculan Disputations*, Cicero almost immediately faces the Heideggerian paradox inherent in attempting to use “being” to reflexively understand itself: “The soul has not sufficient capacity to comprehend itself; yet, the soul, like the eye, though it has no distinct view of itself, sees other things: it does not see (which is of least consequence) its own shape” (XXVIII). This formulation was available to Shakespeare via the 1561 publication, *The Fyve Questions Which Marke Tullye Cicero, Disputed in His Manor of Tusculanum*, where J. Dolman translates Cicero’s observation as “The soule is not able in this

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26 Ibid. 139.
bodye to see him selfe. No more is the eye whych although he seeth all other things, yet (that which is one of the leaeste) can not discerne his owne shape” (Dolman nn). Strong echoes of the lines appear in two Shakespearean texts, the first of which, *Troilus and Cressida* (c. 1602), deals with Shakespeare’s own concerns about essentialism versus existentialism. Ulysses cites from book he is reading, that fame is empty unless a man’s virtues are reflected back on him through the observation of others. Achilles says in response,

Nor doth the eye itself,
That most pure spirit of sense, behold itself,
Not going from itself, but eye to eye opposed
Salutes each other with each other’s form.
For speculation turns not to itself
Till it hath traveled and is mirrored there
Where it may see itself. (3.3.110-16).

The exchange is almost identical to Cassius’s response to Brutus’s observation that “the eye sees not itself / But by reflection, by some other things”:

And it is very much lamented, Brutus,
That you have no such mirrors as will turn
Your hidden worthiness into your eye,
That you might see your shadow: I have heard
Where many of the best respect in Rome
(Except immortal Caesar) speaking of Brutus,
And groaning underneath this age’s yoke,
Have wished that noble Brutus had his eyes.

And since you know you cannot see yourself
So well as by reflection, I your glass
Will modestly discover to yourself
That of yourself which you yet know not of. (*Julius Caesar* 1.2.52-70)

What the historical Brutus and, indeed, all of the agents implicated in the politics of the late republic saw when that inner eye witnessed its own reflection was an identity based on political

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27 *The Fyve Questions Which Marke Tullye Cicero, Disputed in His Manor of Tusculanum*, trans. J. Dolman (T. Marshe, 1561), Early English Books Online, eebo/chadwyk.com
achievement, born of noble entitlement, and cemented by military conquest. While not democratic in the modern sense, in the Roman eyes of Cassius, this is freedom, and it is something he has good reason to fear losing. The yoke under which Cassius says they groan is the arbitrary caprice of tyranny and the power to raise undeservers. This is the syntagm against which Cicero, by necessity, attempts to define his voice and, by extension, himself throughout his life’s work. Changing the conversation in such a manner would necessitate reframing the patrician dialogue, which viewed worth and virtue as inherited qualities won by illustrious ancestors. Only by creating a new context in which rhetorical facility, administrative skills, and juridical learning were equally valued - qualities available to a new man, the novus homo - could someone of Cicero’s background manufacture an identity able to compete with that of the adventurer generals. For while Brutus may have needed Cassius to show him the way to his ego-ideal, Caesar required no such assistance in recognizing his own idealized self. Armed with the things Cicero lacked, a patrician name and a populace eager to worship military conquest, Caesar need only step into the role already awaiting him.

Central to this argument is John Dugan’s *Making a New Man: Ciceronian Self-Fashioning in the Rhetorical Works* (2005), which applies to the Ciceronian canon those strategies developed by the New Historicists for reconsidering Renaissance works as artifacts informed by and informing their respective cultures, particularly, Stephen Greenblatt’s *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* (1980). Dugan observes, “The concept of self-invention was well known to the Romans, if met with varying degrees of suspicion by the controlling city fathers: during his praetorship bid, Curtius Rufus’s disgrace over claims that he was the son of a gladiator is rationalized away by Tiberius’s quip, ‘Curtius Rufus seems to me born from himself (ex se).’ The repeated use of the phrase *per se* or *ex se* reflects the ontological status of the novus
It is Dugan’s contention that from his youthful rhetorical treatise, the De inventione (c. 85 BCE), through his mature work, De oratore (55 BCE), to his final works, Phillipicae and De officiis (44-43 BCE), Cicero’s goal is to position himself as the ideal orator, a match for the generals of patrician lineage such as Caesar and Pompey. However, to do so, he must first make rhetoric acceptable - indeed, essential - to the health of the republic in the eyes of Romans, and to achieve that, he must defuse or deflect the Roman mistrust of rhetoric’s ornatus (textual polish), especially in the Greek mode, as feminizing in such a way that he retains the freedom to employ it in pursuit of his own political goals. Dugan observes,

By the first century BCE the social and cultural distinctions between the Roman urban elite and their analogues in the towns of Italy were fading almost to the point of disappearing. Yet in the crucial area of elective office, the nobiles did use their august genealogies to weave myths that justified their hold on the senate and their exclusion of novi homines. In response these ‘new men’ developed myths of their own to counteract the nobility’s exclusionary strategies.30

As a boy from Arpinum, sixty-two miles southeast of Rome, and the son of an equestrian, Cicero fell into what might be considered in contemporary terms the lower middle-class. Lacking the family history of military conquests and imagines which gave urban patricians their elite status, Marcus Tullius had to find a new way to create a coherent self. As Dugan argues: “The overall goal of Cicero’s protocol is the maintenance of a consistent public persona, that is, one’s various words and deeds must form a stable sign system that constitutes a harmonious image—the signifiers must point to the same signified.”31

30 Ibid., 8.
31 Ibid., 5.
In pursuit of this end, the greatest tool of the *novi* is that employed by Cicero during his speeches of 70 BCE, collected in the work *In Verrem*, which is to say the strategy of *novitas*, whereby the new man sets his own *virtus, industria*, and *ingenium* against the inherited renown of the nobility, whose root word *(g)nobilis* [“known / noted”], Cicero ironizes. The “new man,” he argues, has earned his achievements, whereas the aristocrat has simply inherited renown, which he does not personally share or deserve, from ancestors. Thus, Cicero attempts to not only create the rhetorical tools that will enable him to shape the ontological signifiers that point to what he perceives as self but also seeks to create an environment in which this rhetorically fashioned self will be appropriately received. Shakespeare’s response to Cicero’s project is mediated by a dualism that has its roots in the psyche of the Renaissance commoner who is at once the subject of an absolutist monarchy but who retains the ability to self-fashion an identity within proscribed social and cultural limits. Caesar appeals to both of these drives in that he is also the self-made man in a sense, a *novus homo* who has set himself apart from his patrician contemporaries by replacing inherited *auctoritas* with personal achievement, flying in the face of Roman convention, rewriting laws, inventing holidays in his own honor and changing Rome’s very understanding of itself through the way the year is measured. In this way, Caesar will usher in a new age for Rome, while also retaining for himself the mantle of kingship if not the title.

V. With a Monarch’s Voice

Preloaded with this schema, Shakespeare draws two things from his exposure to Cicero’s works, at least in the late 1590s when he is thinking about both royal accession, with a childless, ageing queen on the throne, and his own legitimacy as man who has just lost his only heir. First, there is, indeed, power in the voice that best employs rhetorical tropes, but mediated through his
own royalism, the rhetoric of masculinity belongs to the one true voice of the monarch, and second, the feminizing valences of rhetoric—epideixis, *ornatus*, alterity—that Cicero is at such pains to simultaneously defuse and co-opt are slick tools which fit best in the mouths of the conspirators. This framework is expostulated in unconscious irony by Brutus in the very way he conceives of the waiting time between a dark idea and its execution: “The genius and the mortal instruments / Are then in council, and the state of man, / Like to a little kingdom, suffers then / The nature of an insurrection” (*JC* 2.1.66–69). This insurrection in the kingdom of the self is brought about only by the acting out of a “dreadful thing,” not by morally pure intent. Indeed, for all his republican posturing borrowed from the historical Brutus, Shakespeare’s version seems to have no qualms with the concept of kingship itself: “He would be crowned: / How that might change his nature, there’s the question” (2.1.12–13). Presumably, therefore, the Shakespearean Brutus would have no difficulty with a King Caesar if the new monarch were able to avoid the trap of disjoining remorse from power, and in fact he doubts even that likelihood when he considers, “to speak truth of Caesar / I have not known when his affections swayed more than his reason” (2.1.19–21).

Such tension between monarchy and republicanism is hardly surprising when we recall Shakespeare’s view of Rome, as T.J.B. Spencer writes,

[In spite of literary admiration for Cicero, the Romans in the imagination of the sixteenth century were Suetonian and Tacitan rather than Plutarchan. An occasional eccentric enthusiasm for one or both of the two Brutuses does not weigh against the fact that it was the busts of the Twelve Caesars that decorated almost every palace in Europe. And it required a considerable intellectual feat to substitute the Plutarchan vision of Rome (mostly republican) for the customary line of the Imperial Caesars.]

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Shakespeare, consequently, adopts the utility of Cicero’s methods, accepting the authenticity of the self-made man over the inherited authority of the nobiles but assigning that authenticity to Caesar rather than Cicero, jettisoning republicanism in favor of royalism, assigning the feminized Hellenist rhetoric of Cicero to the conspirators, while recuperating the Latin rhetoric of the monarch’s voice from the rhetorical dead end to which Cicero had consigned it in The Brutus. Thus, the audience is presented with a Cassius who is able to admit in one breath that we peep about to find ourselves dishonorable graves beneath the great phallus of the colossus Caesar, yet in the next he seeks to ahistorically feminize the general who must be rescued from the Tiber and who screams like a “a sick girl” when in a fever.

This strategy of reconfiguring rather than deauthenticating the tools of the nobiles, thus enabling their co-optation is one Cicero uses again in his prosecution of Verres, the corrupt governor of Sicily. The case is notable for the fact that Verres himself chose exile rather than risk conviction in trial, but refusing to be robbed of the opportunity to showcase his oratorical skill, Cicero publishes the speeches as a fictionalized account of the presentation he would have given had Verres not conceded defeat so quickly, the In Verrem of 70 BCE. Dugan asserts that by taking on Verres’s defender, Quintus Hortensius, the most respected orator in Rome, Cicero not only stakes an ambitious claim to his political aspirations but also takes the opportunity to co-opt for the novi the representational systems of the aristocracy - specifically the wax masks (imagines) of ancestors used in funerals and hung in atriums of homes. Cicero asserts to P. Scipio Nasica, one of Verres’ supporters,

Let the [funeral mask] of Publius [Scipio]Africanus be in the houses of other men; let heroes now dead be adorned with virtue and glory. He was such a man, he deserved so well of the Roman people, that he deserves to be recommended to the affection, not of one single family, but of the whole state. And so it partly does belong to me also to defend his honours with all my power, because I belong to that city which he rendered great, and illustrious, and renowned; and especially,
because I practice, to the utmost of my power, those virtues in which he was preeminent,—equity, industry, temperance, the protection of the unhappy, and hatred of the dishonest; a relationship in pursuits and habits which is almost as important as that of which you boast, the relationship of name and family. (Ver. 2.4.81)  

The destabilizing of noble *auctoritas* that Cicero’s achieves by assaulting its markers of identity, such as *imagines*, manifests in Shakespeare’s Rome as a hyperawareness of self. Most clearly, this appears in Brutus’s immediate overreaction to Rome’s apparent invocation of his name in Cassius’s fake letter, Ligarius’s promise to “strive with things impossible” in the name of honor before he knows what they are, and Caska’s self-identification as “A Roman,” in response to Cassius’s simple “Who’s there?” (*JC* 2.1.46–58, 324, 1.3.42–3).

So strongly do Shakespeare’s Romans believe in the association of personal qualities with self that they continually project the persona outward in the third person where it can be commented upon:

Caesar with nineteen uses of his own name is not alone in his use of this device… with an added seventy-one pronouns of self. Cassius calls himself ‘Cassius’ fourteen times (and says ‘he’ of himself thirty times, out of a total of 201 pronouns referring to himself). Brutus calls himself ‘Brutus’ thirteen times (with 296 self-referring pronouns). Caska calls himself ‘Caska’ once (and has forty-six pronouns of self). All the characters use each other’s names a great deal: for example, Cassius says ‘Brutus’ forty-two times (though Caesar says ‘Brutus’ only four times). ‘Caesar’ is spoken by all characters more than any other name.  

Literary Cassius’s challenge to this apparent fixity between signifier (name) and signified (quality) speaks to more to his author’s Elizabethan cosmology than historical Cassius’s Roman one, in that literary Cassius of the first act is unable to perceive himself as part of a hierarchy, divinely ordered and royally enforced: “‘Brutus’ and ‘Caesar’: what should be in that ‘Caesar’? /

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Why should that name be sounded more than yours?” (1.2.141–42). Indeed, “Caesar,” “Brutus,” and “Cassius” are co-hyponyms to Cassius’s mind, as he has previously leveled himself with Caesar in his assertion, “I had as lief not be as live to be / In awe of such a thing as myself” (1.2.95–97).

As this republican equality of auctoritas, that Cicero would have lauded, is gradually effaced by the royalist bent to Shakespeare’s thinking, in which the characters are firmly fixed in a constellation of quality at varying distances from the monarch who is the pole star, the characters recognize the necessity of borrowing the greatness of others, much like Cicero’s public sharing of Scipio’s imagines during the In Verrem. “Therefore it is meet / That noble minds keep ever with their likes…. / If I were Brutus now, and he were Cassius, / He should not humor me,” Cassius muses in considering Brutus’s appropriate level of society, “And that which would appear offence in us / His countenance, like richest alchemy, / Will change to virtue and worthiness” (1.2.309–14; 1.3.158–60). Similarly, Metellus wants Cicero himself in the conspiracy, not only on the basis that his age will “purchase them good opinion,” but more importantly, “It shall be said his judgement ruled out hands” (2.1.146). Even Antony wishes for the expediency of switching abilities by switching identities: “But were I Brutus, / And Brutus Antony, there were an Antony / Would ruffle up your spirits and put a tongue / In every wound of Caesar that should move / The stones of Rome to rise and mutiny” (3.2.219–23).

However, rather than the equality – or at least level playing field – Cicero had posited in the sharing of the imagines, the slippage of identity wished for by Shakespeare’s patricians simply serves to acknowledge their place in a hierarchy. Even Brutus himself is forced to brood, “That every like is not the same, O Caesar, / The heart of Brutus earns to think upon” (2.3.128–9). Indeed, the strategy of the soldier who disclaims powers of rhetoric in favor of letting
personal honor do the talking is one Othello will use four years after the composition of *Caesar*,
when he claims,

Rude am I in my speech,
And little blessed with the soft phrase of peace,
For since these arms of mine had seven years' pith
Till now some nine moons wasted, they have used
Their dearest action in the tented field,
And little of this great world can I speak,
More than pertains to feats of broils and battle,
And therefore little shall I grace my cause
In speaking for myself. Yet, by your gracious patience,
I will a round unvarnished tale deliver
Of my whole course of love…. (1.3.82–90)\(^{35}\)

It is tempting to see Shakespeare the social climber do internal battle with Shakespeare the
commoner in Iago’s rejection of Antony and Othello’s protestations that they have only personal
honor to speak for them, when Iago asserts, “Virtue? a fig! ‘tis in ourselves that we are thus, or
thus. Our bodies are gardens to the which our wills are gardeners” (1.3.320–21).

Eight years after in the *In Verrem*, Cicero supplements his suggestion of “*imagines* for
all” in the *Pro Archia*, in which he defends the citizenship of the Syrian-born, Greek-speaking
poet Archias, by asserting that literary work is a form of *imagines* superior to the masks
themselves: “Ought we not, when many most illustrious men have with great care collected and
left behind them statues and images, representations not of their minds but of their bodies, much
more to desire to leave behind us a copy of our counsels and of our virtues, wrought and
elaborated by the greatest genius?” (*Pro Ar. *30).\(^{36}\) The genius to whom Cicero alludes is, of
course, Cicero himself, and his attempt to replace the imagines with works is his attempt to
fashion a Roman world in which his own writings will be prized. The logical endpoint of this

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Scriptorum Latinorum, forumromanum.org/literature/cicero/arche.html#30.
reason is that Cicero will become the subject of future writers who will lionize him and the events of his life. However, Cicero’s attempts to control signification in this way are doomed to fail, and it is the genius of the Renaissance, following Cicero’s advice, who gets to determine how the actions of Cicero’s republican contemporaries will be received by future generations, something predicted Shakespeare’s own characters: “How many ages hence / Shall this our lofty scene be acted over / In states unborn and accents yet unknown?” asks Cassius in act three.

VI. Rhetoric in the Roman Style

Cicero’s plan in the Pro Archia is to establish the poet’s bona fides on the basis that he was the teacher of Cicero himself, and since consular Cicero saved the republic from the Catiline Crisis, Archias has therefore been essential to the republic. To achieve this, he frames his oration as a forensic speech in the Greek epideictic mode, something regarded with suspicion by Romans in that its literary expression separates it from “‘the real world’ of the senate and forum.”

In its embrace of both praise and blame, frequently expressed in paradoxes, it is most closely associated with the laudatio funerbris, the centerpiece of the funeral service which the Romans saw as authentically Roman and which had not only textual permanence but also vocal improvisation. Antonius, in the second book of the De oratore, limits the genera dicendi to the legitimate deliberative and forensic branches and dismisses the third type: “As for the third kind, which Crassus touched upon and which was added, as I hear, by Aristotle himself, who threw much light on your subject—even though we need it, it is less essential than the other two” (De or. 2.43). Aristotle says of his divisions of rhetoric,

The species [eide] of rhetoric are three in number, for such is the number [of classes] to which the hearers of speeches belong,” and defines them as “symbouleutikon [“deliberative”], dikanikon [“judicial”], epodeiktikon

37 Dugan 23.
[“demonstrative”]…. Each of these [species] has its own “time”; for the deliberative speaker, the future (whether advising or dissuading he advises about future events); for the speaker in court, the past (for he always prosecutes or defends what has been done; in epideictic, the present is the most important; for all speakers praise and blame in regard to existing qualities, but they also make use of other things, both reminding [the audience] of the past and projecting the course of the future. (Rh. 1.3 and1.4 [1358a36-1358b24] Trans. Kennedy)\textsuperscript{38}

May and Wisse point out that “many ancient readers would have been in no doubt what [Antonius] meant” when dismissing Aristotle’s third type.\textsuperscript{39}

Dugan attributes the dismissive nature of Antonius’s attitude to the fact that Romans did not have a ceremonial oratorical tradition in the manner of the Greeks, and consequently, they absorb epideixis into the other two modes of rhetoric. While the laudatio funerbris (funeral encomium) is the closest approximation to the epideictic mode, and book two of the De oratore moves quickly to a discussion of it, Antonius points out that the laudatio does not require theoretical formulation because everyone knows the qualities of praise and blame.\textsuperscript{40} Despite Antonius’s role in the De oratore as one of Cicero’s interlocutors, it would be impossible for a nobilis like Antonius to validate anything that attacked aristocratic image creation. Cicero has no choice then but to “naturalize the Roman laudatio by placing it within the domain of traditional values (public, useful, unadorned) while they mark out the alterity of Greek epideixis by relegating it to the realm of the questionable (private, pleasurable, ornate).”\textsuperscript{41} Although he lacks the cultural freedom to validate epideixis in the De oratore, its separation from issues of truth and falsity provide it a facility Cicero will employ in the Pro Archia.

Gary Wills claims, “We know we are in Rome as we watch Julius Caesar because everyone is talking Roman – Roman oratory and rhetoric about Roman power” (39–40). In a

\textsuperscript{39} May and Wisse 135.28.
\textsuperscript{40} Dugan 27.
\textsuperscript{41} Ibid., 29.
broad sense, Wills is correct; however, the funeral orations of both Brutus and Antony in 3.2 eschew the unadorned, masculine Roman style of the *laudatio funerbris* in favor of the feminizing Ciceronian Greek epideictic mode. In so doing, Shakespeare subtly reminds his audience that, for all their bluster, neither Brutus nor Antony will be inheritors of the one true voice which belongs to Caesar. Brutus begins in unsurprising fashion with an appeal to his own ethos: “hear me for my cause, and be silent that you may hear. Believe me for mine honor, and have respect to mine honor that you may believe. Censure me in your wisdom, and awake your senses that you may the better judge” (3.2.13–17). His opening structures employ the favorite Ciceronian devices of *epanalepsis* (clauses that begin and end on the same word) “hear… hear,” “believe… believe,” and *metastasis* (rapid transitions from one idea to another) in an exhortation to audience involvement - “hear… believe… judge.” Ethos lay at the heart of the laudation, and Brutus’s deployment of it, if somewhat layered in figuration, would be of no surprise to either Romans or Elizabethans, except that he simultaneously signals this will not be the Roman-talk, claimed by Wills when he incorporates that most slippery of Greek devices to the Roman mind, the *chiaism*, “believe… honor / honor… believe,” and a conceptual chiasmus conflating censure with judgement and wisdom with sense in the phrasing, “censure… wisdom / sense… judge.” As awkward in Latin as the Greek *khiasmos* (or *antimetabole*) sounded, it was even more so in English. Renaissance writers were instructed in its use by Quintilian’s *Insititutio oratoria, Non ut edam vivo / Set ut vivam edo* (“I do not live to to eat / I eat to live”) (9.3.85)\(^{42}\), but Hoskyns\(^{43}\) and others warned against its overuse, something of which Shakespeare was clearly aware, given that

\(^{43}\) Wills 45.
Polonius mocks the device: ‘Tis true, ‘tis pity. /And pity ‘tis, ‘tis true. A foolish figure” (Ham. 2.2.97–98).

Having signaled his intent to employ Greek stylistics, Brutus deploys *taxis* in his epideictic oration: “As Caesar loved me, I weep for him. As he was fortunate, I rejoice at it. As he was valiant, I honor him. But, as he was ambitious, I slew him. There is tears for his love, joy for his fortune, honor for his valor, and death for his ambition” (3.2.24–28). This *partitio* of Caesar’s positive qualities, love, fortune, and valor, antithetically set against his negative quality—ambition—generates the *amplificatio* effect Brutus targets in order to justify the paradox of tears, joy, and honor rewarded by slaying. Of course, unlike the listing of specific achievements in the historical Roman *laudatio*, Brutus gives no evidence for Caesar’s ambition, or for that matter his achievements. Thus a *laudatio funerbris* is not achieved, but instead Brutus leaves his Roman audience with only a dense set of what they perceive to be feminizing figurations, thirty, according to Jean Fuzier, violating what Shakespeare learned from Quintilian’s *Institutio*:

> But however excellent our figures, they must not be too numerous. For overcrowding will make them obvious, and they will become ineffective without becoming inoffensive, while the fact that we make no open accusation will seem to be due not to modesty, but to lack of confidence in our own cause. In fact, we may sum up the position thus: our figures will have most effect upon the judge when he thinks that we use them with reluctance. (9.2.72)

Despite his rhetorical insistence that that the death of Caesar is the good of Rome, the focus of the entire oration is not Caesar, but Brutus himself; it is “*my* country,” “the same dagger for *myself,*” and “*my* death” that Brutus puts at the heart of his rationalization. The result is, for

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*taxis*: ordering of elements in an arrangement moving toward a target or predetermined endpoint. In this case Brutus deploys parataxis (independent but related elements placed side-by-side to develop an accretion of positives qualities) but always in the direction of Caesar’s greatest negative quality, which outweighs all the others, resulting in Brutus’s need to assassinate him.

Brutus, an unfortunate outcome of overestimating signification - of accepting without question his own centrality to Rome’s sense of itself reflected in his personal patrician pedigree. This view of himself as the perfect analogue to the perfect state leads Brutus to destruction through the resulting narcissistic perfectionism and consequent sense of invulnerability. So sure is Brutus of the power of his immaculate performance matched to his unrivaled auctoritas that he does not feel it necessary even to stay and hear Antony’s response or gauge the mob’s reaction. In the Classical mind of a Roman optimate such as Brutus, he is Rome. This is not Brutus speaking to a mob, he believes, but rather the Roman interior addressing itself in a mirror.

If Shakespeare does not allow his Brutus access to the authentic Roman voice but only the empty, feminizing Greek figurations that Cicero fought so hard to rationalize, Antony fares little better in his own oration. The outline structure of his oration follows the conventions of the laudatio in its cataloguing of specific achievements and qualities: “He hath brought many captives home to Rome / Whose ransoms did the general coffers fill”; “I thrice presented him a kingly crown, / Which he did thrice refuse”; “You all do know this mantle. I remember / The first time ever Caesar put it on. / ’Twas on a summer evening in his tent, / That day he overcame the Nervii” (3.2.89–90, 97–98, 168–71). However, like Brutus, he relies heavily on the epideictic mode, praising the achievements of Caesar while directly and indirectly undermining the honor he attributes to the conspirators, employing thirty-six different devices of his own, according to Fuzier. While Antony’s Ciceronian manipulation of the mob is successful in the moment, as with Brutus, his anti-Quintilanian piling up of figures reminds us that he too is being feminized by his own rhetorical style, and that his feminized voice will ultimately yield to the one true voice of the monarch which has passed not from Caesar to Antony but from Caesar to Octavius.

ANTONY. Octavius, lead your battle softly on,
Upon the left hand of the even field.
OCTAVIUS. Upon the right hand I. keep thou the left. 
ANTONY. Why do you cross me in this exigent? 
OCTAVIUS. I do not cross you: but I will do so. (5.1.16–20)

In this exchange, Shakespearean accepts that the authenticity of the monarch’s voice trumps the age difference between the men, Octavius being 21 years-old compared to Antony’s 41 years by the time of the Battle of Philippi in 42 CE. The exchange also gives the lie to Brutus’s earlier claim to Cassius that he is better able to make tactical decisions because of his greater age.

VII. Identity Capital

Roman standard practice in the law courts was to blend the identity of client and advocate such that the ethos of the one stood in for the other.\(^\text{46}\) In this way, the client becomes a surrogate, inheriting his advocate’s family history which, as indicated previously in relation to Brutus’s funeral oration, is the history of Rome itself. Cicero’s defense of Lineus Archias is to subordinate legal argument to the epideictic mode on the basis that poetic arguments are appropriate for the defense of a poet, although this is tempered with continual apologies for using the figurative language and ornamentation of *epideixis* by couching it in accepted rhetorical language. Cicero’s need to defend Archias has as much to do with his own need to establish identity markers for himself as he does for the poet, given the attacks on his own *novus homo* status: “The claim that Cicero’s municipal origins made him a non-Roman, though without legal substance, was a favourite motif of his detractors: Catiline himself, according to Sallust, sneered at the consul as a ‘resident alien’ (*inquilinus civis urbis Romae*) in a speech to the senate in which he vaunted his own ancestral glory.”\(^\text{47}\)

\(^{46}\) Duncan 187.  
\(^{47}\) Dugan 35.
Cicero’s defense to the attacks on Archias and by proxy, on himself, is to criticize the conventions of accepted Roman *virtus*—military accomplishment and politics—and argue for those within reach of the new man: rhetoric, literature, and aesthetics. Shakespeare allows his Brutus to fail both tasks. In the first instance, while Cicero may be able to make a case, however tentatively, for epideixis as an appropriate tool for defending a poet, the mode is entirely inappropriate as a legal defense for the actions of a statesman like Brutus or for the funeral oration of a general like Caesar. Gary Wills perhaps has a point when he observes, “As Plutarch puts it, ‘Brutus did not trust so much to the power of his army as he did to his own virtue.’ It was a slender thing to lean on.”

Whether or not the historical Brutus had sufficient personal *auctoritas* to carry the day, as the other conspirators clearly believed he did, Shakespeare makes sure that his dramatic version will choose all the wrong tools to present those virtues to the mob.

While it is not known how successful *Pro Archia* was, it is clear from his letters that Cicero had hoped the poet would write a poem validating his consulate, a time of glorious success during the prosecution of Catiline, followed by the disaster of exile in 58 for his ordering the execution of Roman citizens without trial on the Nones of December. The loss of *auctoritas* that resulted and which would dog Cicero for the rest of his career was a fact that came home to him when Archias spurned his requests to write a poem valorizing Cicero’s consulship, choosing instead the *auctoritas* of the *nobiles* who had helped him acquire citizenship. Once again the reality that the personal *auctoritas* granted by aristocratic lineage was the ultimate guarantor of acceptable identity and fixing of that self textually became the rock on which Cicero’s self-fashioning efforts foundered. In this way, Cicero’s struggles are not so very different from those

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48 Wills 78.
49 Dugan 44–45.
50 Ibid., 46.
of Caesar, who also refuses to be bound by the patricians in the senate. He is the new thing not the old thing, and perhaps under different circumstances, Cicero could have identified with his struggles had Cicero not also seen himself as the guardian of *Senatus Populusque Romanus*. Caesar’s status as both “new man” and threat to the republic is less problematic for Shakespeare.

If the history of Rome for Elizabethans was the history of the imperium, reflecting in its rise to world domination the rise of England as a global power, then at its head was Gloriana, whose spiritual line of descent from the emperors was a mythohistory Shakespeare, Spenser, and their contemporaries were busily fashioning. Like Cicero, Shakespeare seeks to validate the *novus homo*, not as an identity of likeness with the patricians in the service of the republic, but as an antonym of the *nobiles*, even from whose ranks this particular version has sprung, who can give rise to royalism itself. Cicero’s response to his own failure is to move away from the grand idealism expressed in the epideictic rhetoric of the *Pro Archia* to the pessimism and bitter attacks six years later of the *De provinciis consularibus* and, in the following year, the *In Pisonem*, in which he attacks Julius Caesar’s father-in-law, Piso, consul in 58 BCE and one of the prime movers in Cicero’s exile.

Invective, both in direct attack and in subtly unflattering comparison, typically appears ad hominem in Cicero’s speeches. He offers a view in the *De provinciis consularibus* that Piso is militarily dangerous for the Republic. As consul he has lost a Roman army through incompetence, brought fighting to Macedonia, and his Greek love of *otium* in Byzantium has been worse than that caused by Mithridates. “The mention of Mithridates is particularly pointed,” says C. E. W. Steel in that “[it] picks up that of Hannibal in 4, where Cicero says the effects of the consulships of Piso and Gabinius have been worse for the city of Rome than the
invasion of Hannibal. Piso is thus lined up with the greatest of all Rome’s enemies as well as a particularly feared recent menace: he is to be seen as one of Rome’s external enemies.”

This is the rhetorical position adopted by Shakespeare’s Cassius almost exclusively: Caesar’s personal limitations make him a liability to Rome as much as his ambition makes him a threat to freedom, evidenced by Cassius’s account of the Tiber race. Cassius sets the scene as a field of semantic play in which the signifiers of the nobiles, such as statesmanship and generalship, will become detached from the signified—literally blended together in the tumult of the storm—and only the sign of masculinity will emerge with any clarity: “The torrent roar’d, and we did buffet it / With lusty sinews, throwing it aside / And stemming it with hearts of controversy.” Stripped to his core, Caesar, in Cassius’s account, naturally fails the test, “But ere we could arrive the point proposed, / Caesar cried, ‘Help me, Cassius, or I sink!’”

It is Cassius himself who emerges not only as the sign of Roman manhood generally but more specifically as the marker of authenticity that is Rome’s foundational father from the past, who is also the true Roman who upon whom the city’s future depends: “I, as Aeneas, our great ancestor, / Did from the flames of Troy upon his shoulder / The old Anchises bear, so from the waves of Tiber / Did I the tired Caesar” (1.2.107–115). Similarly, the anecdote of the fever in Spain serves a similar purpose:

He had a fever when he was in Spain,  
And when the fit was on him I did mark  
How he did shake. ‘Tis true, this god did shake:  
His coward lips did from their color fly,  
And that same eye, whose bend doth awe the world  
Did lose his lustre. I did hear him groan:  
Ay, and that tongue of his that bade the Romans  
Mark him, and write his speeches in their books,  
‘Alas,’ it cried, ‘Give me some drink, Titinius’,  
As a sick girl. (1.2.119–128)

51 Steel 48.
This feminized Caesar is an affront not only to Cassius the man but through him in his identity as the city’s legendary founder, threatens to change direction of Rome’s history from its masculine past. This is the new history that Caesar bids them write in their books. Of course, for Shakespeare’s audience, that history is in fact the history of the imperium, and Cassius’s words ring hollow against the background that Livy, Dio, Appian, and others have already provided.

Once in the course of the Alexandrian war, when he was left alone on a bridge in extreme peril, he threw off his purple garment, leaped into the sea, and, being sough by the enemy, swam under water a long distance, coming to the surface only at intervals to take breath, until he came near a friendly ship, when he made himself known by raising his hands, and was saved. (*Civil Wars* 2.150)\

Indeed, swimming was a skill valued and practiced by the Romans but did not form part of Greek training. Plutarch records how Cato instructed his son “in bodily exercises; not confining himself to teaching him to hurl the javelin, to fight in complete armour, and to ride, but also to use his fists in boxing, to endure the extremes of heat and cold, and to swim through swiftly-flowing and eddying rivers” (*Life of Marcus Cato* XX). Conversely, Cassius’s own failings were well documented by Plutarch and Suetonius. “My sight was ever thick: regard, Titinius, / And tell me what thou not’st about the field,” he says in the last act, implicating his own feminizing weakness in the preemptory decision to take his own life (5.3.21–22).

The *In Pisonem* is more than just payback for Piso’s political scheming with Gabinius against Cicero; it is an attempt to recuperate the *auctoritas* he lost following the exile of 58. Cicero does this in two ways: first, he employs the technique of *ornatus*, which was regarded suspiciously by Romans as the kind of feminizing feature of oration that Julius Caesar would

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argue against later, when advocating for his own pure, unadorned Latin, especially when deployed in the low style that Caesar saw as unworthy of Roman nobility. While the division of style into low, medium, and high is of little concern to Cicero during the composition of The De oratore in 55, it become of more pressing importance by the time he is being accused of Atticism ten years later. In his 46 BCE work, Orator, Cicero acknowledges that crass and base expression can be used to express weighty matters in certain situations, and that the boundaries between low and lofty expression are generally permeable – something reiterated by Horace, Quintilian and others. As Auerbach points out, “The doctrine of the style levels led a phantom existence throughout the Middle Ages and awoke to new like in the era of Humanism…. and it was sometimes with admiration that [the great orators of late antiquity] noted changes of style in a single work with one and the same overall style.”

Regardless of the fact that Shakespeare must have known this, the low style of rhetoric is nowhere to be found in the Caesar of his play, who exclusively addresses civic duty and personal fixity in the high masculine style, but Brutus and Cassius betray themselves as feminized when they allow themselves to squabble in low style in their encampment:

CASSIUS. Brutus, bait not me,
    I’ll not endure it. You forget yourself,
    To hedge me in; I am a soldier, I,
    Older in practice, abler than yourself
    To make conditions.
BRUTUS. Go to; you are not, Cassius.
CASSIUS. I am.
BRUTUS. I say you are not.
CASSIUS. Urge me no more. I shall forget myself.
    Have mind upon your health. Tempt me no farther.
BRUTUS. Away, slight man!
CASSIUS. Is’t possible?

54, Erich Auerbach, Literary Language and Its Public in Late Latin Antiquity and the Middle Ages (Princeton UP, 1965) 37.
BRUTUS. Hear me, for I will speak.
Must I give way and room to your rash choler?
Shall I be frighted when a madman stares?
CASSIUS. O gods, ye gods, must I endure all this? (4.3.28–41)

Not only is the language of their argument at the level of a husband and wife’s quarrel, entirely inappropriate for two Roman generals, but the effects of the devices they employ are inconsistent with their aims. Cassius’s use of “bait” (amended to “bay” by some editors) picks up on Brutus’s preceding comment that he had rather be a dog than a Roman who sells honors and is thus an attempt by Cassius to take the role of the bear, yet this too is undermined by his own language in that the “practice” he claims has the associations of “scheming trickery, machinations, even conspiracy (OED 6a).” Even these attempts to rhetorically seize on a defensible position that retains some sense of decora quickly devolve further into the language of the schoolyard:

CASSIUS. A friend should bear his friend’s infirmities,
But Brutus makes mine greater than they are.
BRUTUS. I do not, till you practise them on me.
CASSIUS. You love me not.
BRUTUS. I do not like your faults.
CASSIUS. A friendly eye could never see such faults.
BRUTUS. A flatterer’s would not, though they do appear
As huge as high Olympus. (4.3.85–91)

Their words remind us of their exchange earlier that the eye sees itself only by reflection, in that instance a reflection of worthiness, but now inverted such that what is reflected for both men is only that they have been flatterers to Caesar, a fact betrayed not only by their low rhetorical style but by their actions.

While the one true voice that belongs solely to the monarch does not directly appear during the exchange, the audience is reminded of its authority by Brutus, when he responds to Cassius’s boast that Caesar himself could not have moved him so with, “Peace, peace, you durst

not have tempted him” (4.3.58). The *ornatus* employed by Brutus in his exit strategy from the argument does not allow him the dignity he hopes for: ‘O Cassius, you are yoked with a lamb / That carries anger as the flint bears fire, / Who, much enforced, shows a hasty spark / and straight is cold again” (4.3.109–112). This odd figuration makes Brutus the lamb in contradistinction to the lion of Caesar, seen in the Forum earlier, and offers Cassius little more dignity as presumably the ox on the other side of the team. The simile on the other end is equally odd in that Brutus becomes less than Portia who is able to eat the fire that Brutus himself cannot sustain.

If *ornatus* proves too slippery means for Brutus to depict himself to the audience in the way his historical self might have wished, he fares little better in following the second strategy Cicero invents for the *In Pisonem*, that of attempting to modify reality by controlling signification and specifically, the creation of an identity for Piso that is the mirror of his own. This involves supplementing his strategy of superseding the *imaginæ* with literary works by questioning the authenticity of *imaginæ* themselves: “When Cicero calls Piso’s body a deceptive ‘language’ or ‘text’ (*sermo … mentis*), he situates his attack in implicitly textual terms: to combat the text of Piso’s lying physiognomies Cicero deploys his *In Pisonem*, an authentic textual representation of its author’s *ingenium*.” This strategy enables Cicero to open up a domain of semantic instability where the *imaginæ* no longer reliably signify, and Piso becomes an anti-Cicero: “Moreover, Piso’s fraudulent *imaginæ* set a leitmotif of semiotic suspicion that is sustained throughout the speech and becomes a framework for Piso’s configuration as the mirrored double of Cicero: simultaneously his polar opposite and his doppelganger.”

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With the *imagines* called into question as authentic markers of figuration, Cicero is able to reconfigure his struggle with Piso, not as Roman *nobiles* against provincial outsider, but as didactic instruction from teacher to dullard student:

I want to know finally what it is that you find fault with in this verse, ‘let arms yield to the toga,’ ‘You are saying,’ he says, ‘that the greatest general is going to yield to your toga.’ What! Must I teach you your letters, you ass! You don’t need words but a good thrashing! I did not mean this toga which I am wearing, nor the arms, shield, and sword of one particular general, but because the toga is a symbol of peace and quiet, and, in contrast, arms are a symbol of disturbance and warfare, I spoke in the manner of poets and meant for this to be understood, namely, that warfare and disturbance will yield to peace. Go ask your friend the Greek poet: he will give a passing grade to my figure and will recognize it for what it is, and won’t be a bit surprised by your ignorance. (Pis. 19)\(^{57}\)

Cicero’s angry response to Piso’s literal reading of his poem is an outcome caused by the weaknesses of *ornatus* that formed much of the basis on which his detractors attacked him as a Hellenist. While Cicero had coined his (in)famous phrase *cedant arma togae* to metonymically imply that war should yield to peace, in this case, *arma* referring to Pompey and *toga* representing Cicero, the great general’s failure to validate Cicero’s consulship or to prevent his exile left Cicero vulnerable to attacks on his hubris for responding to Pompey’s self-representation as *imperator armatus* with his own *imperator togatus* in the first place. Dugan attributes Cicero’s misstep to an overconfidence in his ability to fix figuration in a chain of signifiers through an *auctoritas* that he attempts to fashion by association with the far greater *auctoritas* of Pompey. Unfortunately, to Cicero’s ongoing dismay, the general did not feel like sharing. Regardless, of whatever hindsight Cicero may or may not have had about the difficulty in fixing floating signifiers, his togate discourse illustrates the good reason Romans had to be suspicious of poetic language and its relation - or the lack of it - to reality.

\(^{57}\) Trans. Dugan (2005).
This is a concept not lost on Shakespeare, who has his Brutus attempt an almost identical strategy which takes him on a strikingly similar trajectory. “Let’s be sacrificers but not butchers;” he states in the second act, “Let’s carve him as a dish fit for the gods, / Not hew him as a carcass fit for hounds…. // We shall be called purgers, not murderers” (2.1.165–179).

Brutus’s attempt to fix the identities of the conspirators as priests on a holy duty fails almost immediately the deed is done, when Antony perceives a different chain of signification brought about by their actions:

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Pardon me, Julius! Here wast thou bayed, brave hart.  
Here didst thou fall. And here thy hunters stand  
Sign’d in thy spoil, and crimsoned in thy lethe.  
O world, thou wast the forest to this hart,  
And this, indeed, O world, the heart of thee.  
How like a deer, strucken by many princes,  
Dost thou here lie? (3.1.204-210).
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Despite Brutus’s elaborate use of devices to dignify their actions, Antony easily reconfigures the rhetoric to return the conspirators to the role of hunters who have killed and butchered prey.

Shortly before Antony’s entry to the scene, Brutus makes the same mistake again, telling the conspirators “let us bathe our hands in Caesar’s blood / Up to the elbows and besmear our swords,” not an action presented in Plutarch’s version. There is an almost comic vein in Brutus’s belief that “Peace, Freedom and Liberty” will be signified by the act of walking forth to the market place “And waving our red weapons o’er our heads” (3.1.109–110). Again, Brutus makes the mistake of conflating his own singular identity with the group identity that he believes constitutes Rome itself, but Shakespeare undercuts this arrogance by Antony’s ironically anachronistic use of “princes” to describe those who do not have royal authority.
VIII. Transgressive Modes: Humor and Theatricality

Indecorous use of humor was one of the specific accusations of a transgressive oratorical style leveled against Cicero by his contemporaries, among the more general criticisms of theatricality, Hellenism, and feminizing poeticism. Cicero subtly addresses these by the inclusion of Julius Caesar Strabo as one his interlocutors in the *De oratore*, in that the same criticisms had been leveled at Strabo, the tragic poet and orator. Opinion is mixed as to the role this fairly minor character plays in the book, given that the *De oratore* operates as a Romanized *Phaedrus*, with Crassus taking the main role as the Roman Socrates and Cicero, himself, taking on the role of Plato, although in reality all of the participants in the dialogue appear to reflect some aspect of Cicero’s voice. He thus becomes the author of his own literary genealogy by “[shaping] the men who are responsible for his formation as a young orator, engaging in a circular process in which he retrospectively constructs the dialogue’s participants as figures who influenced the orator he became. Cicero thus fashions the ancestors who fashioned him. Cicero presents these interlocutors as prefigurations of his own rhetorical self and constructs his own ancestry.”

Certainly, this kind of drive to find social validation is something Shakespeare understood and worked as toward—if not quite as tirelessly—as did Cicero and Caesar. Ackroyd, Greenblatt, and others have written extensively on Shakespeare’s project to finish the work started by his father, John, in the acquisition of a familial coat of arms and the title, gentleman, for example. Whether Strabo’s positioning in the *De oratore* is meant to be a faint nod to Julius Caesar or not, as some have suggested, or is intended to remind us by faint comparison of the greatness of Cicero’s rhetorical forebears, certainly, Strabo is the spokesman.

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58 Dugan 99.
in the dialogue for the utility of Wit. Strabo explains in Book 2, “There you are, you see two types of witticism, one that is evenly spread through the whole discourse, and another that is pointed and concise. The ancients called the former banter, the latter sharp-wittedness…. Of course… this whole business of provoking laughter is a trivial matter. Still, as you say, Antonius, I have very often seen a great deal accomplished in trials by good cheer and witticisms” (De or. 2.216–220b). Cicero has Crassus validate Strabo’s transgressive oratorical style, including humor, and recuperate it as offering no offense to decorum and state that his theatrical style of delivery and humor does not undermine gravitas.

For his part, Shakespeare seems less convinced than does Cicero that humor and gravitas are compatible. Humor rarely appears in Julius Caesar and, where it does, never in connection with the true voice of the monarch. In response to Cassius’s inquiry about Cicero’s response to Caesar’s pantomime coronation, the dull and treacherous Caska responds, “Nay, an I tell you that, I’ll ne’er look you i’th’ face again. But those that understood him, smiled at one another, and shook their heads; but for mine own part, it was Greek to me” (1.2.280–83). The elision from Cicero in a play so firmly in the Ciceronian style is perhaps surprising and even more so, on the grounds given by Brutus in 2.1 that he will never follow anything others begin, which contradicts Plutarch’s account that he was too fainthearted and too old to join the conspiracy. Many commentators have suggested this is due simply to one actor - Burbage himself, perhaps - doubling for both Caesar and Cicero. Even if this is true, it does not account for why Cicero is kept on the periphery of the action at the play’s inception, particularly since the Philippics did more damage to Antony than any works by the others.

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The effect of Cicero’s marginalizing is similar to that of the minor part given to Caesar: if Caesar’s lack of dialogue makes his absent presence loom all the more ominously in the perceptions of the other characters, then the style of Ciceronian oratory employed by all the characters, Caesar excepted, becomes foregrounded and to some extent ironized by the omission of Cicero himself. While the decorum of Great Julius in his own play is not to be trivialized by humorous association, the same is not true of his grand-nephew’s appearance in the bawdier Antony and Cleopatra. Although, here too, the humor serves to merely to underline the gravitas of the monarch-to-be who will inherit the one true voice of Julius ahead of Antony when he excuses himself from Antony’s drunken bacchanal:

POMPEY. This is not yet an Alexandrian feast
ANTONY. It ripens toward it. Strike the vessels, ho!
      Here’s to Caesar!
CAESAR. I could well forbear’t.
      It’s monstrous labour when I wash my brain,
      An it grows fouler.

ALL. Cup us till the world go round!
      Cup us till the world go round!
CAESAR. What? Would you more? Pompey, good night. Good brother
      Let me request you off. Our graver business
      Frowns at this levity Gentle lords, let’s part.
      You see we have burnt our cheeks. (Ant. 2.7.96–100, 117–21)

Greenblatt observes of the incident, “If cold sobriety marks him as likely to prevail in the struggle for power, it also marks him as far less appealing than the riotous, great-spirited Antony.”62 This may be true, but contrary to Cicero’s view, in the Roman plays the corollary is that indecorous humor marks the characters who are unsuitable to lead Rome.

In this same way, the doomed Brutus and Cassius are allowed their humorous interlude with the intruding poet, punctuating the end of their squabble before the battle of Philippi. Here

the audience is reminded of how high the stakes are in that the poet’s admonition, “Love and be friends, as two such men should be, / For I have seen more years, I’m sure, than ye,” (JC 4.3.129–30) recalls Nestor’s attempted intervention between Achilles and Agamemnon in the Iliad, “Stop. Please. Listen to Nestor. You are both younger than I, and in my time I struck up with better men than you, even you” (II. 2.303–5). In-fighting between Achilles and Agamemnon signals disaster for the Greeks just as the Roman generals’ argument spells trouble for the Republic. However, as Daniell points out, Shakespeare drains the incident of its solemnity by making his intruder not the Nestor-quoting philosopher of Plutarch’s account but simply a poet whom Cassius immediately mocks: “Ha, ha, how wildly doth this cynic rhyme” (JC 4.3.131).

While Cicero has a tenuous comfort level with humor in even formal speeches, Shakespeare allows his Romans at least to flirt with it only if they are destined for the losing side.

The De oratore is a text that, like its model the Phaedrus, questions its own textuality by giving authority to the dialogue, in which true knowledge is spoken (or in this case, overheard) rather than written. As with the potential affront to decorum offered by humor, the implicit theatricality of the oratorical pose implied by a dialogue is a locus of contestation equally fraught with fears that revolve around the inauthenticity of the actor. However, in the De officiis, Cicero takes the root of the word “actor,” which means “agent,” and recuperates it for the orator, who is an agent of truth, in contradistinction to the actor, who is an agent of falsity. Nowhere does Cicero make a stronger case for the utility of theatrical technique than in the second book of the De oratore in which Antonius relates how he was able to use the technique to defend the citizenship of Manius Aquilius, former co-consul with Marius and hero of the Sicilian war,

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during which Aquilius’s troops acclaimed him *imperator*. Antonius first marries the authenticity of his own emotion to that of the jurors by prefiguring it. He says,

> for I remembered him to have been consul, to have been *imperator*, that he had been honored by the senate, and had climbed the Capitol in celebration of his *ovatio*. So when I saw him crushed, weakened, mourning, brought to the brink of disaster, I did not attempt to arouse pity in others before having been overwhelmed in pity myself. (*De or.* 2.195)

Here, Antonius reminds Crassus that he only did next what Crassus himself has just finished praising - the theatrical reveal, prompted, he is quick to point out, not by rhetorical theory (“I wouldn’t know what to say about that”), but by his own grief and pity:

> I ripped open his tunic and exposed his scars. Gaius Marius, who was present at the trial among his supporters, strongly heightened the sorrow of my speech with his tears, and I, repeatedly addressing him, commended his colleague to his protection, and appealed to him top support the defense of the common fortune of generals. When I uttered these lamentations, and also invoked all gods and men, all citizens and allies, it was not without shedding enormous grief myself. If there had been no grief in all of the words I delivered on that occasion, my speech, so far from stirring pity, would actually have been ridiculous. (*De or.* 2.195–96)

Antonius separates his theatricality from that of the actor by the very fact that it is underpinned with his own, authentic emotion, without which in his view, the whole scene would have been rendered ridiculous. Thus the theatrical is freed from the associations of the actor and *decorum* is not violated; the theatrical gesture becomes merely a conduit by which real emotion is transmitted from orator to audience in a moment of transposition.

> It is impossible. of course, not to see in Antonius’s account the direct precursor of Antony’s dramatic unwrapping of the mangled Caesar, and indeed, there is in Antony’s performance more of the dramatic than is accounted for in the *Lives*. Plutarch states that Antony gained favor initially in his appeasement of Brutus and Cassius by proposing in the senate new

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65 Ibid., 175.
provinces for them: “Thus went Antonius out of the Senate more prayed, and better esteemed, than ever man was; because it seemed to every man he had cut off all occasion of civill warres” (Life of Marcus Antonius 14).66 Certainly, Shakespeare gets from Plutarch the implication that Antony’s change of heart was the result of expediency because, “When he saw that the people were very glad and desirous also to heare Caesar spoken of, & his praises uttered; he mingled his oration with lamentable wordes, and by amplifying of matters did greatly move their harts and affections unto pitie & compassion.”67 His literary counterpart also uses amplificatio, primarily through partitio of Caesar’s qualities, but in North’s translation, Antony simply shows the crowd Caesar’s bloody clothing rather than the body itself:

In fine to conclude his oration, he unfolded before the whole assembly the bloudy garments of the dead, thrust through in many places with their swords, & called the malefactors, cruell & cursed murtherers. With these words he put the people into such a fury, that they presently toke Caesars body, & burnt it in the market place, with such tables & fourmes as they could get together.68

While literary Antony’s stage action is only implied, it is difficult not to visualize the discinderem (I tore open) of Cicero’s Antonius in the De oratore, rather than the “unfolded” of North’s translation.

ANTONY: Kind souls, what weep you when you but behold
   Our Caesar’s vesture wounded? Look you here,
   Here is himself, marred as you see with traitors.
1 PLEBEIAN. O piteous spectacle!
2 PLEBEIAN. O noble Caesar!
3 PLEBEIAN. O woeful day!
4 PLEBEIAN. O traitors, villains! (3.2.193–99)

67 Ibid.
68 Ibid.
Shakespeare’s Antony eschews the authentic grief of Antonius, which Cicero is at pains to point out protected Antonius’s action from ridiculousness, while retaining the effectiveness of his drama. Presented with two different versions of an act which will elicit the necessary pity from the audience, Antony’s disingenuous “unfolding” and Antonius’s authentic “ripping,” Shakespeare selects the artifice of emotion from the former and the artifice of the act from the latter, thereby transposing his literary Antony into the realm of the stage and out of the realm of oratory.

Shakespeare is comfortable rearranging his sources to generate the Roman selves he needs and not always with the subtlety of reframing Antony’s rhetoric. On occasion he gives dialogue historically belonging to one character to another or he ignores historical fact completely, as he does when he allows the Greek-speaking Caska to be replaced on stage by his denser dramatic self: “those that understood [Cicero] smiled at one another and shook their heads. But, for mine own part, it was Greek to me” (1.2.281–83). His borrowings from Cicero’s account of Antonius and Aquilius bring with them the irony behind Antonius’s success:

> Years later, Marius, while dining, took particular delight when he was presented with Antonius’ severed head, handling it for quite a long time. Antonius may have been able to have Marius dissolve into tears at the display of Aquilius’ disfigured body, but he will have no such luck in Marius’ purge. Again, the De oratore points to Cicero’s guiding hand within the drama of the dialogue, and invites its readers to contemplate ironies beyond Antonius’ anecdote’s immediate frame of reference.”

Through this allusion, Shakespeare too invites his audience to contemplate irony - Antony’s success in the pulpit juxtaposed with his subordination and eventual capitulation to Octavian. Ultimately, Brutus would be right in his prediction that Antony would be able to do no more than Caesar’s arm when Caesar’s head is off, something that Shakespeare reminds us by rhetorically

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69 Dugan 142–43.
forcing on Antony the identity of the actor who has simple borrowed the techne which defines and validates the oratorical art of the one true voice which belongs to the monarch.

IX. The Authority of Name

Famously, Caesar does not get much to say in the play which bears his name, yet his presence is felt everywhere, and Shakespeare goes to some lengths to ensure it does, changing the body which visits Brutus on the eve of Philippi, which is Brutus’s own “evill spirit” in Plutarch’s account, to be the ghost of Caesar. What Caesar does say is of course marked by various figurations of fixity, but more importantly the “monarch’s voice,” which Antony assigns him in 3.1, speaks in the style of Caesarian Latinitas, over whose nature Cicero and Caesar argued. Of course the conflict between the high style copia and ornatus advocated by Cicero and the sparse, masculine style of Caesar reflected their political purposes, in that the emotive, populist style of oratory had the potential to stir up unrest against Caesar’s absolute authority. In 46 BCE, a decade after the De oratore, Cicero writes the Brutus, a sustained defense against his Atticist critics in the form of a hybrid philosophical dialogue and rhetorical history:

Within the dialogue he offers a minutely detailed and richly nuanced account of Roman oratory’s historical development, whose candour Atticus calls into question when he accuses Cicero of ironically overvaluing the accomplishments of minor figures while remaining silent about his own genius. This comprehensive account of Roman oratory concludes with Cicero’s autobiography only because of Atticus’ impatient insistence. The Brutus’ all-inclusive narrative accumulates a richness of historical detail that becomes tediously annoying for Cicero’s interlocutors, who demand that he abandon his diachronic perspective for a synchronic self-narrative. The confrontation that Cicero stages between Atticus and himself makes all prior Roman oratorical history lead unavoidably to the person of Cicero.70

70 Ibid., 172–73.
Where the *De oratore* ends with the introduction of the youthful Hortensius as the hoped-for ideal orator, whose eclipse by Cicero in reality forms part of Cicero’s self-fashioning agenda, the *Brutus* begins with the death of Hortensius and shares in its mode many of the features of the *laudatio funerbris*. In essence, the *Brutus* is both a propaganda vehicle for himself and a politically engaged funeral oration for the death of oratory - itself a metonym for the death of the Republic under the dictatorship of Caesar.

Cicero treads cautiously, framing his disagreements with Caesar as an intellectual inquiry into the nature of linguistic purity, outlined by Caesar in his own two-volume *De analogia*. Dugan observes that both men take the opportunity to use the debate for mutual self-fashioning, particularly Cicero who, as with his togate discourse, allows the intertextual links between the *Brutus* and *De analogia* to place his culture importance next to that of the general. At its heart, the dispute around the way proper Roman speaking, *Latinitas*, is to be achieved, Cicero reaching for the populist idea that it results from acquired habit (*consuetudo*), which will eventually lead to *ornatus*, as opposed to Caesar’s rational method (*ratio*), whereby language should be generated from formal, easily reproducible rules. Cicero counters this by obliquely suggesting that Caesar owes his renowned purity of speech to his own family *consuetudo* and privileged education. Cicero goes on to concede that rote rules are indeed now necessary to propagate that which was previously learned by good habits, before the current cultural decline and influx of barbarians (under Caesar), habits traceable to the distinguished families like the Muciae and Liciniae. Thus “by tracing the genealogy of his own Latinity back to the distinguished families of Rome’s past, Cicero implicitly privileges his own spontaneous and ancestral Latinity over whatever Caesar’s *ratio* could achieve.”

71 Ibid., 183.
necessary but only as a corrective to the corrupted *consuetudo* that has flourished under Caesar. As Dugan points out, Caesar’s linguistic positon was perilously close to that of Cicero’s Atticist adversaries, and the *Brutus* responds to the threat by treating Caesar’s stripped-down style as itself a feature of *ornatus*. Since the ideal orator is a master of all three registers of style (full, plain, middle), which, according to the *Brutus*, will progress into ever increasing richness and emotional force, Cicero relegates Caesar’s *Latinitas* to a rhetorical side note—essentially an interesting but ultimately aberrant digression outside the history of Roman oratory.

Cicero’s contention that Caesar’s oratorical style is unique to him and not a model for other Romans is one with which Shakespeare agrees, but where Cicero seeks in this repudiation a reification of Republican culture, Shakespeare confirms the elevated sphere from which the one true voice of the monarch issues. “I rather tell thee what is to be feared / Than what I fear,” Caesar tells Antony, “for always I am Caesar” (*JC* 1.2.210–11). Shakespeare uses his monarch’s language to reinforce the idea of a rhetorical sphere which separates him from lesser Romans, giving it an opacity which confounds their attempts to look within. Consequently, the assumptions of the conspirators are continually undone for the audience by Caesar’s true voice. Cassius fears he will not come to the Capitol because he is superstitious, confirmed by Decius who asserts, “he loves to hear / That unicorns may be betrayed by trees,” but Caesar asks Calphurnia, “What can be avoided / Whose end is purposed by the mighty gods?” (2.1.202; 2.2.26–27). Decius claims, “when I tell him he hates flatters, / He says he does, being then most flattered,” but when Metellus attempts flattery, he is rebuffed.

> These couchings and these lowly courtesies  
> Might fire the blood of ordinary men  
> And turn preordinance and first decree  
> Into the law of children. Be not fond,  
> To think that Caesar bears such rebel blood

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72 Ibid., 161.
That will be thawed from the true quality
With that which melteth fools—I mean, sweet words,
Low-crookèd curtsies, and base spaniel fawning. (3.1.35–43)

Indeed, Caesar is “constant as the northern star, / Of whose true-fixed and resting quality / There is no fellow in the firmament,” in contrast to the conspirators who cannot agree from which direction the sun rises at Brutus’s house (3.1.60–62).

If he recognized in the rhetorical works Cicero’s fashioning of the Arpinum novus homo he was into the legitimate defender of the Republic he would become, perhaps Shakespeare recognized in them too a mirror of his own fashioning from provincial poet to royalist champion. It is almost impossible to imagine a different view of his own construction being taken by a man in Shakespeare’ position – a man who owed his own identity as playwright to the legitimizing signification of the livery his troupe wore, a livery soon to be that of the king himself. Regardless of the historical facts driving the failure of the conspirators and the impending end of the Republic that Cicero knew, the constructed interior of Shakespeare’s Romans follows the Ciceronian model where that model is convergent with that of Renaissance royalism, and when they diverge, Shakespeare is happy to pick and choose the Classical elements of identity that suit his agenda.

Certainly, the issues of monarchic authority and dynastic lineage addressed in the Ciceronian high oratorical style of Caesar reach fever pitch a year or two later, when Hamlet considers the consequences for the kingdom if the authentic voice of the monarch is gone completely. Indeed, even ignoring the biographical elements of Shakespeare’s rise to royal favor, the existence of Hamlet, which must have been in its writer’s mind during the composition of Caesar, given their proximity, confirms such elements of the earlier play by taking them up again. Hamlet concerns itself almost exclusively with the authority of the royal voice and the
fashioning of authentic selfhood, but in this new context, theatricality overtakes ethical rhetoric, stoicism is overwhelmed by emotion, and an earlier Classical model of identity that that of Cicero’s Romans is brought into play.
Chapter 2

A Towering Passion

I. Disabling the Heroic Context

The authentic voice of the monarch is silenced at the hands of the conspirators after just two acts of *Julius Caesar*, and for the remaining three acts, the audience is left to watch those who remain scrambling to integrate that voice’s authority into their own explosions of rhetoric. No such wait would be required for the audience of Shakespeare’s follow-up tragedy, *Hamlet*, written perhaps a year or so after *Caesar* in 1600 or 1601. This time the monarch’s voice has been silenced even before the play begins, and instead of rhetorical outburst, Hamlet responds with implosion - a collapsing in on the self. What, if anything, the tragic prince finds in that space of the self has of course been the source of intense scrutiny almost as far back as the play’s inception. While this chapter’s focus is on prince’s selfhood within the parameters of *Hamlet*, it seems clear from his behaviors that the prince who arrives from Wittenberg for the funeral-wedding consists of an identity that is essentially rhetorical in the mold of Brutus but which, unlike Brutus, expresses itself theatrically. Indeed, finding a way out of theatrical rhetoric is a central concern of the play. In *Hamlet and the Controversies of Self* (2000), Jon Lee frames debate on the subject as attempts to answer the question of the play’s first line, “Who’s there?”—a question that since the 1970s has been frequently reframed as “What’s there?” This latter approach is favored by construct theorists, Cultural Materialists, and New Historicists, all of whom tend to eschew concepts of “character,” with their messy personal motives and human
responses, in favor of impersonal social discourses which have their basis in (early) Foucault and Althusser.

Such an approach enables these critics to more easily control the conversation around the troublesome element of subjectivity, and the weight of their arguments over the last three decades has largely disabled any self-constituting valence available to the prince’s emotions. At best, emotion has become an irrelevant component of a discredited model, or as Lee puts it, the New Historcist answer to “Who’s there?” is “nobody” or, occasionally, “everything” but certainly not emotional autonomy.¹ In fact Greenblatt, himself, says, the “very idea of a ‘defining human essence’ is precisely what new historicists find vacuous and untenable.”² For Greenblatt (although he does not specifically address the prince until his 2004, Will in the World) Hamlet lacks the agency that all Renaissance subjects lack because the intersection of the alien and authority, which is always royal authority, is the constitutive force behind the production of identity, and the pressure to fashion the self to accommodate authority neither requires nor allows for self-constituting agency. In essence if that within Hamlet which “passeth show” is emotion, according to the New Historcist view, the prince is articulating an empty signifier. Hamlet’s claim to an emotion-driven interior fares little better at the hands of the Cultural Materialists. In common with the New Historcists, they consider identity to be a product but, in this case, of capitalist ideology rather than monarchic authority. As Lee puts it, “Cultural Materialists, then, are not only interested in what they regard as the true answer to the question of ‘Who’s there?’ (‘nobody’), but also in the varieties and dates of what they regard as a false answer (‘an individual’).”³ The Restoration of Charles II in 1660 is the significant date for

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¹ Lee 209.
³ Lee 76.
Cultural Materialists, after which the bourgeois individual-become-subject is possible in the Althusserian sense, and before which the prebourgeois subject knows himself only as a node in a network of social relations, possessed of no interior discreet from the external world. For the Cultural Materialists, the term “individual” signifies the state of a person before his immersion in Althusserian ideology. Consequently, it is a notional term only, since ideology exists before people are born and so, in this sense, “individuals are always already subjects’ (“Ideology and ISA” 163).4

This is not to say that Hamlet does not address, in the Cultural Materialist view, the intersection where ideologies compete with each other for dominance, with the consequence that identity is thrown into flux. Lee, for example, hypothesizes that the moment Barnardo challenges Francisco in the darkness at the gates of Elsinore is an event where the Althusserian hail is unable to fix identity in the same way that the Ghost will also refuse to submit to the fixing of identity:

The Ghost, a subject of a residual ideology (in Raymond Williams’s term), calls into question the dominant political ideology of Denmark, and so disrupts the process of the constitution of subjects within it. This disruption will focus on the emergent Prince Hamlet; and in the play, the way in which he recognizes the Ghost literally dramatizes his constitution as a subject. Much of Hamlet, the play, takes place in the space of this moment when ideology is failing to constitute the subject; it is a play not of being, but of becoming.5

However, the idea that Hamlet is character waiting for the dominant ideology to assert itself and subsequently fix his subjectivity or, alternatively, that his struggles are the result of his failure to recognize which node he is in the social network leaves no space for autonomous response, least of all one driven by an internal emotional state. Indeed, to use Jonathan Dollimore’s terms,

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5 Lee 32.
Cultural Materialism regards the myth of the autonomous self to be an artifact of “essentialist Humanism.”

The drift of such recent scholarship, therefore, not only denies Hamlet the autonomy of heroic action, it disassembles the context in which heroism is an available outcome in the first place. While acknowledging that these propositions have a focus of convenience, Lee somewhat inexplicably concludes “this focus of convenience suits Hamlet” because, in this particular case, the prince is largely unemotional beyond some generalized anxiety. The Prince is far more thoughtful than he is emotional. Indeed, it is his lack of either emotion or remorse at some of his actions—his killing of Polonius, his treatment of Ophelia, his sending of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to their deaths—that impresses.” Lee’s passive phrasing, of course, only partly disguises that those who are “impressed” are critics like himself who would like to squeeze emotion out of the conversation. Doing so, however, has the effect of masking rather than revealing solutions to an integrated reading of the very problems in Hamlet that he and other recent scholars identify.

II. Epic Answers to Hamlet’s Problems

Certainly, the play has resisted efforts to find a context in which heroic agency can be reconciled with the prince’s refusal to take responsibility or at least to demonstrate some empathy at the points Lee specifies. Hamlet’s apparent failures of conscience have traditionally been attributed to paralysis or madness, with one or both of these stemming from his entrapment in a liminal zone between the burden of revenge and the attraction of discorporation. The result

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7 Lee 207.
is a melancholic psychotic who is too preoccupied to care about the chaos left in his wake as he stumbles around Elsinore scheming and philosophizing. Not only has this never been a particularly attractive portrait of the prince, it does little to address the most difficult problems in the play. First, Hamlet has no difficulty dispatching Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Polonius, or Claudius himself when he is enraged enough, yet he seems unable to find the right kind of rage for the best part of four acts, despite the fact that he clearly already possesses anger aplenty at both his mother and uncle even before the play begins. Second, this prince who is a theater aficionado and sometime thespian himself counterintuitively despairs at the power of theatricality to entrap expression of the authentic self and obsesses over ways to escape it, evinced, for example, in his tirade at the player king’s “dream of passion.” Third, and perhaps most bizarrely, Hamlet refuses to acknowledge that Laertes has any kind of claim to emotional selfhood equal to his own - an act so egregious even to Hamlet, himself, that he seems to claim a multiple personality disorder in order to excuse it. Most intransigent of all the play’s difficulties is Hamlet’s inexplicable diversion into self-alienation when, by his own admission, he has the “cause and will and strength and means” to carry out the single act that would resolve his problem. The other end of this same paradox is the prince’s equally inexplicable finding of himself again in the fifth act just in time to kill the king. These are the very difficulties which famously lead Eliot to claim that the play is a failure, the revenge plot being too insubstantial a thing upon which to predicate the intensity of the prince’s responses, up to and including his madness.⁸

This chapter proposes that through Homer, Shakespeare finds not only the design of his own raging prince in the arc of the angry heroic prototype, Achilles, but also the thematic frame

he will use to structure Hamlet. Therefore, applying to Hamlet the same thematic ordering which Achilles’ anger lends to the Iliad results in an integrated set of logical solutions to the difficulties of interpretation which Hamlet presents. In this sense, Shakespeare finds his own answer to his play’s first line, “Who’s there?”, in the first line of epic’s seminal text: “Rage – Goddess, sing the rage of Peleus’ son Achilles” (Il. 1.1).9

Hamlet’s response to the silencing of the monarch’s authentic voice, then, is a falling back onto “That which passeth show,” which far from being a place-holder for a self that has yet to be invented, as Francis Barker asserts,10 actually is a locus of intense emotional flux where melancholy and rage coexist. The former is the emotion on which passion studies of Hamlet have tended to focus, recently those by Paster, States, and Rowe among others, and commonly in terms of humoral theory.11 Melancholy is therefore of only passing note here, and in any case, the tendency of criticism over the years to follow the prince down the path of melancholy rather than to see him as an essentially angry character has perhaps obfuscated rather than clarified his motivations and actions. From the observer position, melancholy and alienation can look remarkably similar, but of the two it is alienation that is caused by anger. Tracing anger as a thematic structure through the Iliad leads to outcomes which are strikingly parallel to those in Hamlet, Achilles by turns failing to act, absolving himself of responsibility for the deaths of friends and comrades, struggling to be authentic, accepting self-alienation, and ultimately rejecting his victimized self-image in favor of decisive action.

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III. Textuality and the Varieties of Classical Anger

As with all Classical threads through Shakespeare, situating Hamlet’s anger in the context of Aristotle or Homer is problematized by Shakespeare’s own exposure to sources. Some have pointed to Hector’s citation of Aristotle’s *Ethics* in *Troilus and Cressida* (1602) as evidence of Shakespeare’s lack of Classical learning, but as Martindale observes, this anachronism is “surely deliberate. It is inconceivable that Shakespeare thought Aristotle lived before the Trojan War.” Nevertheless, Janette Dillon notes,

Shakespeare almost certainly never read Aristotle, so that as Alexander Pope put it in his introduction to *Shakespeare* (1725), ‘to judge… of Shakespeare by Aristotle’s rules is like trying a man by the laws of one country who acted under those of another.’ *Poetics* was printed in Latin in 1498, but did not become widely known until after the publication of Francesco Robertello’s commentary in 1548, and was not translated into English until the eighteenth century.”

In fact much of what Shakespeare is likely to have known of Aristotle, in common with other sixteenth-century authors, comes to him mediated through later Latin writers, such as Horace and Donatus - a fourth-century commentator on Terence whose work was popular in Elizabethan grammar schools.

Shakespeare’s exposure to Homer himself is equally problematic: Martindale says that he seems to have read a great deal about Troy, but how much of that reading came directly from Homer remains subjective. Chapman translated Books 1–2 and 7–11 of the *Iliad* in 1598, and in 1608 he added Books 3-6 and 12. In 1611 he published the full translation with a revision of the 1598 Books. However, Arthur Hall had already translated Books 1-10 from a French version in 1581. It is highly likely that Shakespeare had read at least the seven books of 1598, both because he knew Chapman and because their publication was a literary event (Martindale 95). That said,

while the construction of *Troilus and Cressida* seems to borrow much from Chapman’s 1598 translation and perhaps Caxton’s romance, *Recuyell of the Historyes of Troye* (c.1473), there is no concrete evidence that Shakespeare directly read any Homer whatsoever or, conversely, that as a Humanist scholar, he had not already read the entirety of both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* in one of the various extant Latin or French translations. In the face of lack of evidence to the contrary and given his extensive referencing of Homeric epic, this chapter proceeds on the basis that Shakespeare had a working knowledge of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* in their entirety with a focused knowledge of specific books from a variety of sources. If nothing else, the depth of Homeric knowledge alone on display in texts like *Hamlet* and *Troilus and Cressida* implies a sustained and focused engagement with source material.

Understanding how Iliadic anger drives the narrative of *Hamlet* and renders the prince’s most problematic behaviors inevitable, as opposed to opaque contradictory, involves examining first the role of anger in Classical epic. Works by Classical scholars David Konstan and Leonard Mueller provide the framework this chapter employs for examining how the bards of Homeric Greece understood anger and its relation to epic. Konstan’s *The Emotions of the Ancient Greeks: Studies in Aristotle and Classical Literature* (2001) provides an examination of anger in the *Iliad* predicated on Aristotle’s definition in his taxonomy of *pathē* from the *Rhetoric*, further developed in the *Politics* and the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Specifically, Aristotle defines anger as an emotion accompanied by pain, with an associated need to return that pain to its source in the form of revenge. However, Aristotle also suggests that pleasure inheres in anger because of the anticipation of revenge. A different approach is offered by Leonard Muellner, who provides a philological analysis of Iliadic anger in his 1997 book, *The Anger of Achilles*: 
Mēnis in Greek Epic,¹⁴ where he considers mēnis [(μῆνις) “divine anger”] to be a taboo term, rather than simply an emotional state which implies the repairing of slight through revenge in the form that Konstan proposes. Muellner proposes that this special condition of anger to be understood as a structuring theme that provides the framework of the entire poem.

While viewing Hamlet through the lens of the angry interior may be a novel interpretational approach in English literary studies, it is far from new in Classical scholarship. Understanding anger has been seen as the key to unlocking the Iliad since antiquity, and in that vein, Muellner traces the engagement of scholars with placing a definition on mēnis back to the time of Aristarchus, editor of the Homeric poems in the second century BCE, who identified the meaning as “long-lasting rancor” because of its (now disputed) link to the verb mēnō “remain.”¹⁵ This is the definition that was passed on by the archbishop of Thessalonica, Eustathius, in his twelfth-century CE Homeric commentaries. The central question for Muellner is why synonyms for mēnis, such as kōtos (rancor) and even the verb derived from it, mēniō, are applied to other epic characters, Odysseus and Aeneas for example, but the noun form, mēnis, is exclusively used to describe the emotional state of the gods in general and a single mortal in particular—Achilles.

The direction of the answer for Muellner is to be found both in the role of Zeus in enforcing the cosmic hierarchy and the social bonds of Homeric culture. The Iliad (and its likely precursor, Hesiod’s Theogony) presents a model of social ordering in which solidarity of the group with a single transgressive member of its faction is assumed. This transgression is most commonly the refusal to accept an insubordinate position in the cosmic order, and thus it is the group rather than the individual which incurs the anger of Zeus, manifest as violent suppression by his thunderbolts. The word understood by the archaic Greeks for this state is mēnis.

¹⁵ Ibid., 2.
Consequently, in Muellner’s theory, divine (or epic) mēnis is not an emotional state in an individual, directed at another individual; rather, it is a propulsive force implicated in and not separate from devastating action directed against the insubordinate group. In this manner mēnis acts to reinforce and restore hierarchical social ordering, itself a feature of the thémistes of exchange, concentric with relative prestige, which Marcel Mauss calls a “total social phenomenon” in the world of epic.\textsuperscript{16} This is the frame structure Shakespeare borrows for Hamlet, whereby the prince’s anger is associated with a single transgressor but directed against the group with whom he is associated, especially given Hamlet’s concomitant need, only occasionally felt, to restore appropriate hierarchy to Denmark’s moral and political systems. Marcellus’s observation that the Ghost’s appearance signals “something rotten in the state of Denmark” is suggestive of a misalignment in the country’s power groups. Citizens like himself and Horatio, much less royals and courtiers, will by necessity of events be absorbed into new factions on which the health of the nation will be predicated.

Muellner’s contention that anger in the Iliad in its mēnis iteration should be understood thematically is driven in part by his examination of contexts in which it appears in Homeric poetry, and further, that it is of two varieties: “divine” mēnis, which belongs only to the gods, and “heroic” mēnis, which is attributed only to Achilles. Further, this mode of anger is elicited only by major transgressions against divine law in Homeric poetry, which Muellner identifies as the violation of religious and social taboos, including acting like a god, mortals having sex with goddesses, violating exchange rules and hospitality, prize distribution, and disrespecting rites due to the dead.\textsuperscript{17} The distribution of the word in these contexts leads him to conclude that the word is a feature of Albert Lord’s theory of epic composition in the oral mode, “whereby the

\textsuperscript{16} Cited in Muellner 51.
\textsuperscript{17} Muellner 8.
traditional singer of tales learns to perform a song by manipulating larger units of composition, constellations of formulas, into associative though not rigidly repeated sequences. Like myths, and unlike musical themes, these themes actually consist of their variations.**18** Within this generative theory of epic, widely accepted by many Classical scholars, *ménis* is more than just roughly convergent, in contemporary terms, with an anger that necessitates catastrophically corrective violence. It is actually the name of a theme which the poet uses to structure and drive the narrative.

Hamlet’s initial condition is not Iliadic *ménis* but an entirely different form of anger, *kótos*, signaled by the impotent rage he expresses in the first soliloquy. He directs this form of anger at a mother who has betrayed his father and an uncle who has usurped the crown and the royal marriage bed, but though it breaks his heart he can only hold his tongue. As with Muellner’s definition of *ménis*, a rigorous comparison of *kótos* and *khólos* in the Homeric epics involves complex philological analysis which is the beyond the scope of this argument. However, in his 2005, *Fighting Words and Feuding Words: Anger and the Homeric Poems*, Walsh provides the following working definition:

> [I]n addition there are two kinds of anger. One is *khólos*, which can be dealt with immediately. To indicate this feature of *khólos*, Calchas uses the metaphor of digestion (*katapépsēi*, Il. 1.81). The second kind of anger is *kótos*, which will not be brought to an end until the angered party has in some sense completed it (*óphra teléssēi*, Il. 1.82), a point that Calchas emphasizes by claiming that *kótos* will last into the future (*kai metópisthen*, Il. 1.82).**19**

Part of the prince’s emotional and mental distress is attributable to the fact that he must search within himself for the right kind of anger, which is to say, the corrective anger that distinguishes

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18 Cited in Muellner 9.
Zeus from the other Olympians and Achilles from the other heroes. The context in which the prince finds himself at Elsinore requires more than the eye-for-an-eye asked for by his father. It is surely by design rather than accident that King Hamlet addresses his son exclusively through the Biblical signifiers of confession, purgation, and serpent, while Prince Hamlet employs almost exclusively Graeco-Roman figures and tropes, a recognition of the fact that King Claudius has created faultlines in Denmark’s fabric at the mythic level which will not be healed by scratching the itch of khólos through simple Old Testament vengeance. Rather, the epic mēnis model requires that the prince first restore the status hierarchy of the kingdom, with himself - the authentic king’s surrogate - at its head. This new societal order demands a complete realignment that is only possible through the corrective force of divine rage in epic mode. Hamlet resists and delays action against his uncle because he must let go of the khólos he initially experiences so that he can instead find within himself the societal corrective of epic mēnis.

IV. Mythic Instability in the Foundations of Denmark

Hamlet’s comment in 1.5 that “the time is out of joint” is commonly regarded as an affirmation and reiteration of Marcellus’s earlier observation that there is “something rotten” in the kingdom, but the contexts of the two lines suggest one is not a validation of the other. While Marcellus has been privy to the lengthy exposition about Denmark’s current military buildup, he does not have access to the interpretative keys of regicide and fratricide that have been provided to Hamlet, and therefore both his analysis and implied solution remain limited. That which is simply “rotten” can be cut out and discarded, as the ghost urges Hamlet to do, but Hamlet’s observation actually addresses structural damage that has been done to the state’s foundations and this is not something that can be excised by the expediency of simply killing Claudius. By
choosing the imagery of dislocation, specifically the separation of the arm from its shoulder, he singles out the part of the royal body - metonymic of the state’s body - which weds, which grants largesse, and which wields military power.

One way to understand the nature of the damage to Denmark that Hamlet recognizes is through Georges Dumézil’s “trifunctional hypothesis” from *L’ideologie tripartie des Indo-Européens* (1958), in which he proposes that archaic Indo-European myth reinforces a three-part structure for the stable society, consisting of warfare, fertility, and sovereignty. The Iliadic narrative, for example, conforms to this model through the way in which Patroklos and Diomedes transgress the realm of divine warfare by acting like gods on the battlefield, and the mortal Anchises transgresses laws governing fertility through his forbidden coupling with the divine Aphrodite, resulting in the birth of Aeneas. The greatest taboo, however, is the threat to the sovereignty of Zeus himself by Achilles. Yet in continually testing the boundaries between the three domains, the heroes and mortal lovers of epic ultimately reinforce them.

In his description of the queen as the “imperial jointress to this warlike state,” Claudius freely acknowledges that through Gertrude he has been able to insert his own arm into the joint from which he separated the arm of the true king and by so doing, has destabilized all three of Denmark’s foundations in the Dumézilian sense. In particular, militarily, he fails to decisively deal with the Norwegian threat, maritally, he incestuously sleeps with the true king’s wife, and most damaging of all in the context of mythic identity, he has usurped sovereignty itself. This is the cultural and societal catastrophe that Hamlet realizes he has inherited, and (re)setting the foundations of Denmark will require far more than a simple killing: Claudius must meet his end in disgrace, with his rank and honors revealed to be the sham that they are. Such violations of the

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Dumézilian trifunctional model result in those taboo behaviors which Muellner identifies as invoking the corrective of ménis which rights social relations in the epic world of Achilles, therefore no less will right the same in Hamlet’s Denmark.

If Shakespeare does have an epic structure in mind for Hamlet, understanding the prince’s thinking involves seeing the relative positioning of each of the players on the board in Iliadic terms and equally importantly, seeing the ways in which Hamlet understands his own epic relationship to those players. In Muellner’s Iliadic taxonomy, Zeus’s corollary in Hamlet, warlike and implacable, issuing edicts from beyond the mortal realm is King Hamlet himself. The prince makes plain his father’s position in the nominal pantheon of his own imagination during the closet scene:

Hyperion’s curls, the front of Jove himself,
An eye like Mars to threaten and command,
A station like the herald Mercury
New-lighted on a heaven-kissing hill,
A combination and a form indeed
Where every god did seem to set his seal. (3.4.56–61)

The elevating of the old King to the level of Jove-Zeus intensifies the debasing of his queen, Gertrude, who by association is also divine. Claudius is therefore guilty of triple taboo crimes: the implicit disobedience of usurping the god’s sovereignty, sex with a divinity, and the disrespecting of funeral rites, any one of which alone is cause enough to incur divine wrath. However, the conventions of epic require that the anger of King Hamlet must work in the human realm through his mortal son in the same way that Zeus ultimately works through Achilles at Troy, and thus, anger becomes the propelling force behind the heroic trajectory of both tragic and epic heroes.

If Achilles’ heroic arc truly does function as Shakespeare’s model, it follows that Hamlet should be seen to progress through the same stages of solidarity, anger, alienation, friendship,
and back to solidarity, and this is, indeed, the prince’s ultimate trajectory in the play. It follows
then, as mēnis in the Iliad realigns social ordering and when applied to the epic hero rather than a
god, ambiguates and reifies sovereignty, so too does Hamlet’s anger reify hierarchy by
challenging the new order imposed on Elsinore. Shakespeare, of course, need not have copied
this structure directly from the Iliad. With variations it recurs in many epic myths. Mary Louise
Lord lists six elements commonly involved in this structure: the withdrawal or long absence of
the hero, often associated with a quarrel and the loss of a loved one; the disguise of the hero
during the absence or upon his return; the theme of hospitality; the moment of recognition or
fuller revelation of the hero’s identity; a disaster because of or during the hero’s absence or
withdrawal, and the return and reconciliation of the hero.21 Lord also notes the fact that in both
the story of Meleagros, as narrated by Phoenix, and the larger context of the Iliad itself,
devastation is set in motion by angering the gods Artemis and Apollo respectively.22

In Hamlet the angered otherworldly presence is King Hamlet’s ghost, the one true voice
which has been silenced before the play begins. The loss of the loved father sets Hamlet on the
journey Lord indicates, withdrawing into alienated paranoia and perhaps madness, followed by
the departure and return from England, the revelation of identity in the graveyard, the
reconstituting of the solidarity group with Horatio and Gertrude, and the reconciliation with
Laertes at the moment of death. Whether Shakespeare lifted his structure wholesale from the
Iliad, as the argument presented here suggests he almost certainly did, or whether he inherited it
from a tradition which has its roots in Greek myth makes little difference: Hamlet as a prince

21 Mary Louise Lord, “Withdrawal and Return: An Epic Story Pattern in the Homeric Hymn to Demeter
and in the Homeric Poems.” The Homeric Hymn to Demeter: Translation, Commentary, and Interpretive
22 Ibid., 184.
whose sense of himself is of a raging interior is completely congruent with that of Achilles, and his decision-making follows suit.

V. From kótos to ménis

Although the moral fabric of the kingdom and certainly of Hamlet’s immediate family have been bent, no actual laws - beyond abstractions in Dumézil’s mythic sense - have been broken, and presumably the best he can hope for is that his pain will eventually be alleviated through an early death for Claudius by natural means. This outcome will not change Gertrude’s callous insensitivity to Hamlet’s grief, of course, and indeed, kótos “refers to a long-term anger… such as that spurred by the ancient rivalry for Helen as bride…. a central source for Iliadic kótos.”

In this early phase of the play, Hamlet’s heady mix of jealousy over his mother’s crassness, indignation at Claudius’s opportunism, and disappointment in his own lack of accession prime him for a purpose and a telos which the structure of the play will shortly provide. The prince’s first soliloquy, “O that this too, too sold flesh would melt,” suggests these are primary motivations, given that he reiterates the ideas mockingly to Rosencrantz as the reason for his distemper at 3.2.331, “Sir, I lack advancement,” and more seriously to Horatio at 5.2:

Does it not, think thee, stand me now upon—
He that hath kill’d my king and whor’d my mother,
Popp’d in between th' election and my hopes,
Thrown out his angle for my proper life
And with such coz’nage—is ’t not perfect conscience
To quit him with this arm? (5.2.63–68)

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Until the interview with the Ghost, his kótos manifests primarily as disgust with the social behaviors at court, ironically telling Horatio, “We’ll teach you to drink deep ere you depart,” and voicing his anger at the observance of damaging traditions: “This heavy-headed revel east and west / Makes us traduc’d and tax’d of other nations— / They clepe us drunkards, and with swinish phrase / Soil our addition; and indeed it takes / From our achievements, though perform’d at height, / The pith and marrow of our attribute” (1.2.175; 1.4.17–22). The kind of damage being done to the reputation of the state by such behavior is unfortunate, but Hamlet seems to imply he regards it as an unfortunate Danish cultural artifact, rather than something that falls entirely to Claudius, although the new king clearly evidently embraces the tradition in way King Hamlet did not. Consequently, by itself such an irritation is not enough to convert kótos to ménis.

While Hamlet’s emotional trajectory follows that of Achilles for much of the play, the arcs of the two heroes are obviously not identical because Achilles begins his journey in media res. Consequently, the very first word of the Iliad, famously, is ménis (or more accurately, the accusative singular, ménin [μῆνιν]), signaling the nature of Achilles’s rage to be divinely marked from the beginning of the epic, according to Muellner) until it reaches its telos in philotes and ultimately the hero’s transformation into metaphor. Given his tragic environment, Hamlet is not initially marked as a force of social ordering, which is not to say that he is not angry. Like Achilles Hamlet is in fact always angry—certainly in the first four acts, and most commonly his anger manifests as passive aggression with destructive irruptions at various moments of extreme stress. Unlike Achilles, however, whose insult and anger are already in play by the start of Book I, the nature of tragic ordering requires that the prince must first be transformed by events before he can become a revenger, able to convert the relatively useless (in this case) emotions of
khólos\textsuperscript{24} and kótos\textsuperscript{25} to the requisite ménis. In the hermeneutics of Homeric emotion, Hamlet’s arc can be characterized broadly as having three stages. Based on his verbalization of incredulity at the rapidity of the royal marriage, “within a month,” he has been experiencing kótos, from the announcement of the wedding several weeks before the play begins until his first appearance in 1.2, and this will last until his interview with the Ghost, at which point kótos will transform to ménis. Hamlet’s anger is replaced in much of the fifth act by stoic acceptance of his role as revenger until the conclusion of the fencing match, at which point ménis returns to be subsumed in the teleological moment of revenge. All three of these stages will be marked by periods of khólos.

As the moment of King Hamlet’s revelation approaches, the prince’s petulance becomes increasingly punctured by aggressive outbursts of khólos, prefiguring the translation of kótos into the divine rage characteristic of Iliadic ménis. The last episode of this occurs when Horatio and Marcellus attempt to restrain him:

My fate cries out
And makes each petty artery in this body
As hardy as the Nemean lion’s nerve.
Still am I called. Unhand me, gentlemen.
By heaven, I’ll make a ghost of him that lets me. (1.4.81–85)

Hamlet’s determination to allow fate to give him purpose and direction is the last signal that he senses a greater purpose for his anger, and characteristically, he expresses the translation in Classical terms. Clearly, he plays on the invulnerability of the Nemean lion integral to the story of the first labor of Heracles, but in some accounts of the myth, the lion could lure its would-be hunters into its cave by taking the form of an injured maiden. Once inside the hunter was

\textsuperscript{24} khólos: synchronic anger.
\textsuperscript{25} kótos: diachronic anger requiring a completion event.
devoured when the woman transformed back into the lion. Here Hamlet senses that the Ghost of his father will transform him into something fearsome. The moment comes in 1.5.23–25:

GHOST. If thou didst ever thy dear father love—
HAMLET. O God!
GHOST. Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder.

In these three lines Hamlet’s anger is both given a social purpose and validated by divine authority, a feature Hamlet acknowledges by his interjection recognizing the father-king as his personal divinity and anticipating the commandment for which kótos has prepared him. The prince acknowledges the transformative effect the king’s speech act has on him by rejecting his formerly childish acting out: “Yea, from the table of my memory / I’ll wipe away all trivial fond records, / All saws of books, all forms, all pressures past / That youth and observation copied there.” In its place the force of ménis, will dominate the prince’s interior: “And thy commandment all alone shall live / Within the book and volume of my brain, / Unmix’d with baser matter. Yes, by heaven!” (1.5.98–104).

To illustrate the dynamic of divine ménis, its variant “heroic ménis,” and the relationship of both to the ordering of group solidarity, Muellner provides the episode of Diomedes and Ares in Book 5 of the Iliad. Having been given ménos kai thársos [courage and daring] by Athena to glorify himself among the Argives, Diomedes proceeds to kill one of the two sons of the Trojan priest Dares. With the truce already broken in Book 4 by Pandaros, the Trojans are spurred into action, led by Ares, but at the key moment, Athena calls Ares aside with the exortation, Ares, Ἄρες βροτολογέ, μιαιφόνε, τειχεσιπλήτα [“Ares, Ares, mortal-devastator, defiled-slaughterer, wall-approacher,”].26 She suggests they allow the Achaeans and Trojans to fight on their own to avoid risking the ménis of Zeus, who has instructed the gods not to assist either side. The anger

26 Muellner 10.
of Zeus is not something Ares can risk and so he complies, until he is called into battle by Apollo, whose authority meets or exceeds that of Athena. The gravity with which the gods regard the invoking Zeus’s ἔνιος is signaled here by the breaking of epic battle convention, whereby one god’s forestalling of another is typically the cue for the god to intervene on the side he or she favors. In this case, however, ἔνιος trumps Athena’s wishes and the cue is missed. Athena enters the battle on the side of Diomedes, signaling at this point that in the narrative that two factions have appeared; Ares’ defiance of Zeus’s ἔνιος is predicated on maintaining the coherence of his group rather than revolt against Zeus. The ensuing battle between Ares and Athena happens only because Athena seeks to counter the transgressive god of war and only after Hera has sought permission from Zeus for her to enter the fray on his behalf.

The application of this structure to Hamlet reveals the anger of King Hamlet to have a similar (re)ordering effect in Denmark. The Prince has entered into an uneasy solidarity with the royal family, signaled by his agreement to eschew a return to Wittenberg at Claudius’s request and to hold his tongue about his misgivings of the first soliloquy. This solidarity group is out of joint, however, and the ἔνιος of the Ghost radically reorganizes it through his directive to Hamlet: “lend thy serious hearing / To what I shall unfold…. / So art thou [bound] to revenge when thou shalt hear” (1.5–7). After the Ghost’s intervention, the solidarity groups become Hamlet / Horatio / Ophelia, distinct from Claudius / Polonius / Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Ἔνιος does more than just generate factions, however; it controls them through the intervention of divine force.

In the Homeric structure, Ares’s rejection of solidarity with the gods against the mortals, by initially standing aside at Athena’s bidding, is replaced by his identification with the Apollo / Aphrodite group, indicated by the fact that Apollo calls him into action using the same epithets
Athena had used to pull him out of the battle. However, later in Book 5 he pays the price for defying Zeus: “Diomedes yelled his war cry, lunging out / with his own bronze spear and Pallas rammed it home, / deep in Ares’ bowels where the belt cinched him tight. / There Diomedes aimed and stabbed, he gouged him down / his glistening flesh and wrenched the spear back out / and the brazen god of war let loose a shriek” (Il. 5.987–92). Of significance in this incident is not so much that Ares suffers Zeus’s anger at the hands of his agent Athena but rather that, “On the level of narrative structure, divine mēnis against Ares has been displaced by a variant kind of mēnis on the part of Diomedes, and a dramatic change in the cohesion of the divine community is its direct result.”27 This second form of anger, heroic mēnis, is available to mortals and is a variant of divine mēnis, which belongs only to the Olympians and the semi-divine Achilles.

This is the form of anger Hamlet searches for in his own narrative and through which he has been tasked and authorized by a divine father to effect a similar change in the Olympic order of Denmark. The heroic variant of divine mēnis is a consequence of the hero’s rage elevating him to a position equal to a god (signaled by the epithet daimoni ἴσος). As Diomedes learns on his fourth assault on Aeneas, such a position cannot be tolerated in epic because of the divine displacement effected in occupying the divine center, although Zeus temporarily allows Achilles to do so because his mother is the goddess, Thetis, who petitions the Olympian king on her son’s behalf. Hamlet tacitly acknowledges the Achillean path upon which he finds himself - that the assumption of heroic mēnis implies both a manifest and a terrible destiny, and thus his oath to clear the table of his memory of all trivial, fond memories in favor of his new destiny is almost immediately tempered by the consequences for himself: “O cursèd spite, / That ever I was born to set it right.” (1.5.196–98).
VI. Heroic Anger and Divine Transgression

Despite the stimulus given to his anger by the king’s ghost, Hamlet does not live in the heroic age of Achilles, and so he finds himself immediately propelled not into action but into a paradox of Early Modern selfhood anticipated by Cicero and Quintilian: how to escape from theatricality. In this case Hamlet must find a way to make anger a force in the real world rather than a series of declamations about bloody thoughts. Much of Hamlet’s angry bombast is an attempt to wrestle his way out of theatricality so that he can embrace the mēnis within himself, but in a kind of poststructuralist loop, the rhetoric he employs to do so only produces more rhetoric: “Oh vengeance!”, “Now could I drink hot blood / And do such bitter business as the day / Would quake to look on”, “Oh, from this time forth, / My thoughts be bloody, or be nothing worth.” (2.2.577n, 3.2.381–83, 4.4.64–65). Hamlet saw a vision of himself in the first act that was one part drive and three parts anger, but unable to step out of the theatrical role he has built from rhetoric and into the actual role of revenger directly, he attempts to embrace heroic mēnis by a more indirect route, seeking to become in Homeric terms daimoni ἵσος, like a god himself.

In epic when the hero attempts to excel the god who is both his divine double and his antagonist, he invokes the mēnis of that god against himself in a variant of Zeus’s mēnis against transgressive Olympians. Muellner proposes that the phrasing of Apollo’s incitement to Ares, “Wouldn’t you join in and keep this hero (Diomedes) from battle?” (5.456) is not by accident a parallel to the phrasing of Athena’s request of Zeus to remove Ares from the battle: “‘in the hope that after smiting… Ares I may chase him from the battle’ (αἱ κεν Ἀρηα/λυγρῶς πεπληγυία μάχης ἐξ ἀποδίωμαν [5.762–63]).” This convergence of the language describing hero equaling or

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28 Ibid., 11.
excelling god is indicative of the basis for heroic anger and thus heroic glory. Diomedes and Ares exist in such a pairing and so Diomedes incurs Ares’s anger in the same way that Ares himself had incurred that of Zeus.

Thus the formula daimon isos, “equal to the god,” which occurs nine times in the Iliad, is always and only used of a hero in his aristeiai (deeds-of-valour narrative), whether it be Diomedes, Patroklos, or Achilles himself. Its metrical alternative, which is all but once applied to heroes in their aristeiai, is isos Arei, “equal to Ares”; the latter expression also occurs in a longer form, brotoloio Arei isos Arei, “equal to Ares the mortal-devastator,” with the same contextual restrictions as daimon isos.29

The moment at which the convergence of mortal and god occurs is Diomedes’s fourth assault on Aeneas, who is under Apollo’s protection. Having been repelled three times by the god, he is referred to on the fourth attempt as daimon isos (equal to a god), and he spurs Apollo to enlist Ares in the fight, pointing out that Diomedes would fight with Zeus himself. Athena has already warned Diomedes to fight only with Aphrodite, but his stubbornness and violence mirror that of Ares, with whom the narrative associates him. In Muellner’s view Diomedes’s fourth assault on Aeneas in defiance of Apollo puts him into a transgressive zone where mortal becomes the god’s equal. Indeed, Muellner observes, “the diction implies that Diomedes, in his stubborn fourth assault on Aeneas, actually does transcend the limits of human nature and become the god’s equal.”30

The Ghost provides Hamlet with an implicit reminder of the expectation that his son will follow this model when he characterizes Claudius as “a wretch whose natural gifts were poor / To those of mine” (1.5.50–51). Hamlet, therefore, seeks to attain heroic anger in the manner of Diomedes. In the prince’s case, this is done through identification / antagonism with Claudius, who has become god-sovereign by seizing the center and displacing to the periphery the divine

29 Ibid., 12.
30 Ibid., 14.
father, King Hamlet, and debasing his divine queen. Shakespeare generates this identification with Claudius by the narrative positioning of Hamlet as displaced king to immanent king (“Sir, I lack advancement” (3.2.331)) and as royal son-of-divine-father to adopted son-of-pseudo-father (“Not so, my lord, I am too much in the sun” (1.2.67)). The role of antagonist is manifest through Hamlet’s many revenges on the king. Indeed, as Peter Mercer puts it, Hamlet is never not revenging, at least passive aggressively - perpetually foregrounding and deflating the lies and pretensions at Elsinore through his puns and distractions. The Hamlet / Claudius / Gertrude triangle leads works in this same dynamic, the prince channeling the anger of the divine father by proxy against the father’s doppelganger. Therefore, as avatar for King Hamlet, the prince must win back his mother-wife’s love by superseding Claudius’s personal qualities.

In the Iliadic structure, Diomedes does not kill Aeneas; rather he retreats from his fourth assault under threat from Apollo’s divine anger and so he escapes punishment. This lesson which not only saves Diomedes but keeps the cosmic categories intact, according to Muellner, is not lost on the structure of Hamlet, famously a play whose telos is continually punctuated by stopping and retreating. In response to Claudius’s veiled threat during the performance of Gonzago, “Have you heard the argument? Is there no offense in’t?”, Hamlet delights in pointing the offense out - but only in tone not in word (3.2.229). This advancing and retreating behavior in the Diomedian-Achillean model, always stopping short of immediately provoking violent suppression by the mēnis of Claudius, continues until eventually the king’s anger becomes a fever: “Do it, England; / For like the hectic in my blood he rages, / And thou must cure me!” (4.3.68–70). In 3.3 Hamlet advances again, intending to kill the pseudo-king at prayer but withdraws once more, choosing not to “do it pat,” telling himself rather, “thy physic but prolongs

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thy sickly days.” Eventually, however, Hamlet’s heroic mēnis turns out not to be that of Diomedes, repelled permanently by the divine mēnis of the god with whom he exists in a binary of identification and antagonism, but rather the prince will choose the destiny of Patroklos, who does not shun the anger of the gods and who is subsequently destroyed by them.

VII. Hamlet and (Un)authorization of Mēnis

If Hamlet’s first soliloquy implies that Claudius’s status as divine has come through theft of the otherworldly father’s authority, conversely, he is also a mortal who has transgressed the ordering of the Great Chain as lover of the divine Queen. In Hamlet’s heavenly rhetoric, his father is by turns Hyperion and Hercules, and his mother, Niobe (1.2.137–42). Just as the overreaching of heroes like Patroklos for divine status on the battlefield is a transgressive behavior that brings about divine anger, the sexual behavior of mortals with gods is also a threat to Olympian order. Anchises acknowledges this fact in his appeal to Aphrodite after he unknowingly has sex with her: “As soon as he saw the neck and the beautiful eyes of Aphrodite, / he was filled with fright and he turned his eyes away, in another direction. / Then he hid his beautiful face with a cloak…. ‘Please, take pity! I know that no man is full of life, able, if he sleeps with immortal goddesses” (Hymn to Aphrodite. Trans. Gregory Nagy). Relationships between mortals and Olympian gods must be kept secret to avoid the wrath of Zeus, but in Hamlet the scandal of Claudius’s bonding with the “imperial jointress” exists as an open secret. In myth, although Aphrodite warns Anchises that he will be safe unless he boasts of the fact with a thûmos (θυμός “spiritedness”) that lacks phrenes (φρήν “mindfulness”) and names her, in which case Zeus will strike him with a thunderbolt in his mēnis, Hyginus, in the Fabulae.

reports the rumor that he did name the mother of his son, Aeneas, to friends over wine and was thunderbolted by Zeus, rendering him crippled.\textsuperscript{33}

Somewhat surprisingly, while both Claudius and the Gertrude have defied the will of King Hamlet and disrupted the royal hierarchy through adultery, Claudius alone is characterized as, “that incestuous, that adulterate beast,” and he alone is to suffer King Hamlet’s $mênis$, acting through the prince. “But howsoever thou pursuest this act,” the old king tells Hamlet, “Taint not thy mind, nor let thy soul contrive / Against thy mother aught” (1.5.42, 1.5.84–86). This state of affairs is all the more surprising given Muellner’s contention that in myth, Anchises is a greater threat than a woman who makes love to a male god, given the patriarchal ordering of Olympus and the male bias in Greek culture. He provides the example of Hermes’s message to Kalypso in the \textit{Odyssey} that she risks invoking the $mênis$ of Zeus for her relationship with Odysseus, even though it is he not she who will be thunderbolted. Similarly, the problem for Kalypso, as Muellner sees it, is that she is breaking the solidarity of the divine group by demeaning herself with a mortal, and thus Zeus’s injunction threatens both of them.\textsuperscript{34}

Following this reasoning, the fact that Hamlet will not be the instrument of the King’s anger does not mean that Gertrude is not also under threat, as the Ghost advises the prince, “Leave her to heaven / And to those thorns that in her bosom lodge / To prick and sting her” (1.5.86–88). The solution perhaps lies in the fact that where $mênis$ appears, “It is a sanction meant to guarantee and maintain the integrity of the world order; every time it is invoked, the hierarchy of the cosmos is at stake.”\textsuperscript{35} Mortals sleeping with gods implies that a god has kept a secret from Zeus which, in itself is a challenge to his nóos (“mind”), a dangerous precedent that

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{33} Muellner 20.  
\textsuperscript{34} Ibid., 23.  
\textsuperscript{35} Ibid., 26.}
must be punished, but it is not necessarily fatal, unlike the transgression of the human hero who becomes daimoni īsos, a direct threat to Zeus which must be completely extinguished. Gertrude’s relationship has been a factor in the disordering of the Danish state, but the fratricide and regicide of Claudius are crimes that make him daimoni īsos, and as such remain the primary threat to the mytho-social hierarchy. This perhaps explains how Gertrude is able to escape the prohibitions of divine anger channeled through her son, dying only by misadventure instead.

Gertrude’s incestuous acts may not fall within the authorized sanctions of Hamlet’s heroic anger, and perhaps even Claudius might have escaped with a lesser punishment if sullying a divinity were his only cultural taboo. However, his relationship with the divine queen is ultimately part of a more serious societal violation, one shared by Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. If, like Anchises receiving the lesser punishment of crippling, Claudius might have escaped death, the proscriptions of mēnis stand behind sanctions governing the treatment of guests, codified in the epithet Zeus Xenios (xenoi “guests, hosts, strangers”). Claudius’s existence as a member both of the court and the royal family was possible only through the suffrage of Hamlet, his king and brother. In this sense, like all courtiers, Claudius is essentially a guest of the king, enjoying royal hospitality in Elsinore and in the royal family circle. Usurping the crown and stealing the king’s wife is therefore not only treason and a betrayal of filial bonds, it is a violation of the rules governing xenos.

There can be no doubt that Prince Hamlet well understands the rules governing hospitality, indicated by his admonishment of Polonius over the quartering of the players:

HAMLET. Good my lord, will you see the players well bestowed? Do you hear, let them be well used, for they are the abstract and brief chronicles of the time. After your death you were better have a bad epitaph than their ill report while you live.

POLONIUS. My lord, I will use them according to their desert.
HAMLET. God’s bodkin, man, much better. Use every man after his desert, and who should ‘scape whipping? Use them after your own honor and dignity. The less they deserve, the more merit is in your bounty. Take them in. (2.2.518–28)

In this vein, all of the visitors to Elsinore are formally greeted by the prince and extended the hospitality of his home. Horatio receives, “I am glad to see you well,” and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, “Gentlemen, you are welcome to Elsinore” (1.2.160, 2.2.366). So particular is Hamlet in recognizing hospitality that he makes a show of formality by shaking his school friends’ hands so that they will not be offended if he seems to welcome the players with more excitement. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern will abuse that hospitality in a way that the players and Horatio do not, and for that alone, the prince claims a clear conscience for sending them to their deaths. Even were this not the case, the Iliadic structure of legitimate targets for anger is not in doubt for Shakespeare: the Trojans, through their association with Paris, indicated by “The expression, ἐπεὶ φιλέσθε παρ’ αυτί, translating as “since you [plural] were hosted by[Helen],” [which] makes plain that the sins of Paris will be repaid by the group with whom he is associated.³⁶ Were the betrayal of Hamlet by guests in his home not enough, they would die anyway because they are immediately absorbed into Claudius’s solidarity group and take on his transgressions by association.

VIII. The Greatest Taboo

Even greater than violating xenos and the only mēnis-incurring crime which is equal to that of challenging divine sovereignty is Claudius’s demonstrated contempt for rites due to the dead, consigning his brother to an afterlife that the old king describes as “horrible, oh, horrible, 

³⁶ Ibid., 37.
most horrible!” (1.5.80). The risk of incurring divine wrath for refusal to properly witness the
transition of the psukhē (breath / spirit) to Hades in the Homeric model of anger is evidenced by
the fact that the entirety of Book 23 is given over to the funeral of Patroklos. Similarly, Creon’s
refusal to grant such funeral rites to his nephew, Polynices, becomes the central issue of
Antigone and ultimately the source of the tragedy. King Hamlet’s account of his own purgatorial
suffering is laid squarely at the feet of Claudius who through his actions prevents performance of
last rites:

Thus was I, sleeping, by a brother’s hand
Of life, of crown, of queen at once dispatch’d,
Cut off even in the blossoms of my sin,
Unhouse’d, disappointed, unanel’d.
No reck’ning made, but sent to my account
With all my imperfections on my head. (1.5.74–79)

Certainly, Hamlet unintentionally does the like for Polonius, consigning him to a secret burial
without the pomp that should attend his status, but in many ways, this is the point. By taking the
figure behind the arras to be Claudius, Hamlet seizes what he thinks is the opportunity to repay
his father’s ignoble and un-Christian death with the like. Even were Hamlet to suspect the
interloper might not be the king, based on his immediate question to that effect, it would make
no difference. Mênis requires that the group suffer the same consequences of its transgressive
individual member. If Claudius is to suffer the same fate in the afterlife as King Hamlet, then so
too is Polonius. This also holds for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, whose deaths Hamlet, makes
a point of reporting, he contrived with “no shriving-time allow’d” (5.2.47).

Shakespeare makes this one point the most pathetic in the ghost’s litany of complaints,
and as noted previously, it is the issue to which Hamlet is the most scrupulously rigorous in his
execution. If Shakespeare is horrified by this act most of all, the Iliad provides him several
unambiguous scenarios about the relationships between epic anger, rites, revenge, and death.
Given the seriousness of disrespecting funeral rites, it is a mark of the intensity of Achilles’s anger that he refuses Hector’s dying plea: “I beg you by your life, your parents—/ don’t let the dogs devour me by the Argive ships…. / but give my body to friends to carry home against, / so Trojan men and Trojan women can do me honor / with fitting rites of fire once I am dead” (Il. 22.398–405). Achilles’s response, “Beg no more, you fawning dog—begging me by my parents! / Would to god my rage, my fury would drive me now / to hack your flesh away and eat you raw” (22.407–09), marks him as one who defies divine mēnis by the power of his own rage and signals that he intends to bring about his own death. Surely, Shakespeare finds in this exchange the formula for Hamlet’s raging second soliloquy, where he cries, “I should ha’ fatted all the region kites / With this slave’s offal - bloody, bawdy villain! / Remorseless, treacherous, lecherous, kindless villain!” (Ham. 2.2.575–77).

The second Iliadic lesson here is possibly the source of Hamlet’s fatalism in the fifth act. Since by his act of refusing Hector’s rites, Achilles knows he will bring about his own death, Hector’s threat that his dying curse will “draw god’s wrath” and his foretelling of Achilles’s death at the hands of Apollo and Paris at the Scaean Gates has no force. Indeed, the narrative tells us, “But brilliant Achilles / taunted Hector’s body, dead as he was, ‘Die, die! / For my own death. I’ll meet it freely – whenever Zeus / and the other deathless gods would like to bring it on!’” (22.429–32). Hamlet reiterates the same willingness to defy divine injunction when he refuses to allow Claudius a death in the act of purging himself, reminding us of the crime against the Ghost: “‘A took my father grossly, full of bread, / With all his crimes broad blown, as flush as May; / And how his audit stands who knows save heaven” (3.3.80–82). The king’s audit may well be unknown, but he has indicated to the prince that were he not forbidden to do so, he would relate a terrifying afterlife:
I could a tale unfold whose lightest word
Would harrow up thy soul, freeze thy young blood,
Make thy two eyes, like stars, start from their spheres,
Thy knotted and combinèd locks to part
And each particular hair to stand on end
Like quills upon the fretful porcupine. (1.5.15–20).

The tortures to which Claudius has consigned his brother have lent the prince an intensity to the motive and the cue for passion that is beyond Claudius’s ability to know. Still, he sees enough in Hamlet’s anger to be filled with alarm, and in the fashion of Agamemnon’s feud with Achilles, he faces the challenge of defusing that anger while retaining his status as sovereign.

IX. Surviving Hamlet’s Mēnis: Bargaining

David Konstan offers a somewhat alternate but complimentary theory of anger in epic and why Agamemnon’s embassy fails to win Achilles back to the side of the Achaeans. In the Rhetoric 2.2, Aristotle defines anger as “a desire, accompanied by pain, for a perceived revenge, on account of a perceived slight on the part of people who are not fit to slight one or one’s own.” Pain and pleasure are not themselves emotions for Aristotle but simple sensations, which he calls aesthēsis. Anger is also accompanied by pleasure from anticipation of returning the slight and the associated pain to its source through revenge. Konstan speculates that Aristotle uses the phrase “accompanied by pain” because such pain may be different from that accompanying the slight rather than accompanying the anger, and he may also want to distinguish revenge arising from anger from revenge arising from other causes. Aristotle separates anger from hatred in that the former is a painful sensation while the latter is not. Of interest here is the fact that Aristotle defines anger as arising only from a single causation, indicated by the word oligōria, meaning “belittlement” or “diminishment,” from oligos, “few” or

37 Qtd. in Konstan 41.
“small.” A slight is an “activation (energia) of a belief about something seeming worthless” 
(Energeia doxês peri to mèdenos axion phainomenon, 2.2, 1378b 10–11).”38

Slight can be subdivided into three classes: the first is kataphronēsis “contempt” – the 
idea that something is of no value and therefore we slight it. The second is epêreasmos, “spite’ -
defined by Aristotle as “blocking the wishes of another, not for oneself, but so the other might 
not have it” (Eudemian Ethics 2.2, 1378b18–19).39 Slight arises here from the fact that no 
personal advantage is available to the slighter. The outcome of this kind of insult is that the 
person slighting does not respect the person being slighted, given that it is possible to impede the 
wishes of another for personal gain or selfishness but still respect that person. The third category 
of slight arises from hubris, “arrogant abuse” - that which causes shame to another and which 
arises out of a sense of superiority rather than personal gain.40 Since anger for Aristotle is always 
a response to slight, it does not map with the contemporary definition of anger, which can be a 
response to harm. Konstan explains it this way: Aristotle regards harm as that which engenders 
not anger but hatred, although someone might be the source of anger and also hatred 
simultaneously. As a consequence, we cannot slight those we fear because fear is weakness in 
the self and so is incompatible with contempt, although we may hate such a person. Likewise, we 
are not angry with those who fear us because their fear demonstrates respect. The goal of the 
angry individual, following Aristotle then, is to seek revenge by making the offender feel the 
same belittlement and diminishment (publically witnessed) that caused the slight in the first 
place and thus return the anger to the source from which it came. Such a definition of anger does

38 Ibid., 43.
40 Konstan 45–46.
not allow for revenge to be in the form of death because death removes the possibility of returning the slight.

In the world of the *Iliad*, Achilles’s refusal to accept the gifts offered by Agamemnon in exchange for the taking of Briseis has its roots in the differences between *poinê* [penalty] and *apoina* [ransom]. Since Briseis was taken from Achilles as a sign of Agamemnon’s superiority and also as replacement for his own loss of Chryseis, Achilles was both slighted and harmed. In Konstan’s view the former requires that Agamemnon pay a publically witnessed penalty and the latter, ransom in equivalent exchange value. Agamemnon’s ransom is not a penalty that diminishes him in a way suitable to assuage anger. This Homeric model applied to *Hamlet* results in an outcome whereby the things Claudius offers Hamlet are inadequate in form and function:

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We pray you, throw to earth
This unprevailing woe, and think of us
As of a father; for let the world take note,
You are the most immediate to our throne,
And with no less nobility of love
Than that which dearest father bears his son
Do I impart toward you. For your intent
In going back to school in Wittenberg,
It is most retrograde to our desire,
And we beseech you, bend you to remain
Here in the cheer and comfort of our eye,
Our chiefest courtier, cousin, and our son. (1.2.106–17)
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Claudius’s offer of paternity, succession to the throne, and a favored place at court constitute *apoina*, indicating a recognition that he has done Hamlet harm, presumably deduced from the surly, punning reception he receives when initially introducing Hamlet to the court. Were this the case, ransom might be acceptable to the prince, but his words to Horatio after his first soliloquy, immediately subsequent to the ransom offer and before he learns of the ghost, reveal that Hamlet is experiencing more than injury. The incestuous marriage to Gertrude, done so hastily that “The
funeral bak’d meats / Did coldly furnish forth the marriage tables” (1.2.180–81), disrespects the memory of Hamlet’s father, and the offer to Hamlet of the kingdom which by rights is already his smacks of hubris.

No actual harm has been done to Hamlet, beyond the inconvenience of waiting for the throne after Claudius dies or abdicates, but the royal family, Hamlet, and Denmark itself have all been insulted by Claudius’s actions. Hamlet may well hate Claudius in the first act, but what is certain is that he feels Aristotelian slight at his hubris. The slight manifests as pain: “O God! God! / How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable / Seem to me all the uses of this world! / Fie on’t, ah fie!.... / Must I remember?” (1.2.132–35, 143). In a position of relative powerlessness, of course, he can only hold his tongue until authorized to enact revenge three scenes later by the divine father. Hamlet finds himself in the Achillean position of being offered apoina, when in fact his anger requires poinê, and this is what accounts for the failure to kill Claudius at prayer. As Aristotle defines anger, the offender must be aware that that revenge is being enacted upon him (aisthesthai), and a sudden death at the edge of sword is not sufficient. Claudius’s attempt to bargain his way out of Hamlet’s anger is unsuccessful because he misunderstands his own positioning relative to it.

X. Surviving Hamlet’s Mênis: Countering

Since it is clear to the king by act four that Hamlet’s mad rage is both a challenge to his sovereignty and beyond rational negotiation, he is left with other no choice but to meet anger head on. The mythic subtext of Hamlet places Claudius in opposition to his nephew’s anger at the level of pseudo god-king to epic hero, but on the mortal level, Shakespeare’s model for their relationship is that of Agamemnon to Achilles, since it is in fact Agamemnon who is the source
of the strife. The ways in which Claudius is unable to blunt the force of Hamlet’s epic rage, therefore, are predicated on the Argive king’s equally unsuccessful attempts to bridge the schism opened up by mēnis through exchange value. Muellner explains how the rules of exchange in Homeric culture are bound up with timē [prestige], and therefore the relative standing of the exchangers is complicit in the negotiation. According to Muellner, Agamemnon initially tries to blunt the force of Achilles anger at the taking of Briseis through various equivalences, but his approach fails because of the relative value of what is on offer. In heroic Greek society, “there is no notion of value other than relative value and no notion of relative value other than publicly witnessed and approved exchange value such as that defined in a communal division.”41 The value of each of the spoils (gēras [prize]) is given to the heroes in order according to his timē. The rules for exchange of value objects, thémis (θέμις), are covalent with mēnis, in that violation of one is violation of the other. Agamemnon puts himself in an impossible bargaining position by placing Chryseis above even Clytemnestra in exchange value and thereby leaving himself no way to trade her away without losing face or without taking an equal gēras to replace her.

This is the structure to which Shakespeare binds Claudius, in that the king predisposes any transactions with Hamlet to failure since he has already decided Gertrude and the crown are the ultimate value, worth even damnation, a truth he fully accepts when he asks, “May one be pardon’d and retain th' offense?” (3.3.56). Since he has already decided that negotiation with Hamlet will begin on this basis, Claudius knows that he is caught in a paradox which will disable his attempt to assuage the prince’s anger:

My fault is past—but O, what form of prayer
Can serve my turn, ‘Forgive me my foul murder?’
That cannot be, since I am still possess’d
Of those effects for which I did the murder—
My crown, mine own ambition, and my queen. (3.3.51–55)

41 Muellner 32.
It may be that Hamlet’s anger cannot be alleviated by any of the king’s actions, but given the prince’s thoughtful nature, it is not difficult to imagine that he might moderate his behavior if his uncle were to relinquish the throne to him, release his hold over Gertrude, and choose a life of penance. This would at the very least give Hamlet pause for thought if not outright release from his vow of vengeance. More to the point, it would save the very soul that Claudius fears he has sacrificed by the murder. His apparent covetousness of the “effects” for which he did the deed does not seem aligned with the magnitude of payment that he recognizes will due on his judgement day: “And oft ’tis seen the wicked prize itself / Buys out the law. But ’tis not so above: / There is no shuffling. There the action lies / In his true nature” (3.3.59–62). This implies that more is at stake for him than simply governance of the kingdom of Denmark and the love of his former sister-in-law while he lives, and in fact the Iliadic model suggests that he is caught not only by worldly goods but by codes governing status.

Muellner elucidates those codes in his reading of Agamemnon’s response to the priest Khalkhas’s warning to Agamemnon that he must return Chryseis to her family in an attempt to assuage the mēnis of Apollo, currently devastating the Achaean forces. Agamemnon states that it is oūdē eoike (unseemly) for the king, greatest of Achaeans, to go uncompensated because he is aware that the surrender of the girl to Apollo’s wishes is intended to disgrace him. Achilles knows, however, that reconstitution of the original spoils from which Chryseis was distributed is impossible, and he is astonished by the fact that Agamemnon would ask for such. He urges him instead to repair the girl to her father and stop the killing, with the understanding that the distribution from the sacking of Troy will be compensation enough for the loss of his géras. The Achaean king interprets the advice of Achilles as a challenge to his standing, since Agamemnon is being asked to give up the géras he was awarded while Achilles gets to keep Briseis, his own
gēras from the same distribution. Agamemnon offers to either take a new distribution, which he knows is impossible, but which maintains his status in the eyes of the Achaeans, or take the gēras from one of their three best warriors, Ajax, Odysseus, or Achilles, which would have the same effect. While Agamemnon indicates that he wishes he could unmake the previous hubristic decisions which have trapped him, Muellner observes that the dispute with Achilles is now bound up with mēnis, inasmuch as they are arguing essentially about who has the right to it, which itself is a question of who is further up the cosmic hierarchy. As Muellner puts it, in the culture of epic there is no insult in a king treating an inferior as his inferior.

This is the dynamic underlying Claudius’s willingness to continue on the same path despite the misery Hamlet inflicts on his court in this life and damnation in the next. However he came into possession of the throne, he is the de facto king. Leaving aside the issues of his own sins, from Claudius’s perspective, in an absolute sense, he is his nephew’s superior, and the prince’s ongoing attacks on that position by his insults, puns, and ironies constitute an intolerable demeaning of his status as “the Dane.” The rhetoric Claudius uses to justify sending the prince to England is not marked by the language of covetousness but rather by the elevated diction and legal terms of feudal royalty: “I like him not, nor stands it safe with us / To let his madness range…. / The terms of our estate may not endure / Hazard so dangerous as doth hourly grow / Out of his brows” (3.3.1–7). When Hamlet is at his most threatening, Claudius perceives himself not as the hypocrite feeling the lash of conscience at Polonius’s remark about sugaring o’er the devil nor the murderer too guilty to pray at confession, but as the offended monarch. The epic structure employed by Shakespeare prevents him from responding to his nephew’s challenge in any other way, and Claudius is left with no choice but to meet Hamlet’s anger with his own.
Meeting Hamlet’s rage head on with his own is problematic for the king in two ways: Claudius is by nature a coolly calculating rather than an angry personality, as evinced by his disarming of Laertes’s pseudo-coup in Elsinore. More problematic for him than his innate nature, however, is that he can only lay claim to heroic anger if he is able to surpass Hamlet’s personal qualities. Muellner explains the link between mēnis and status in the epic framework by an analysis of Agamemnon’s claim to anger when he is forced to try to bring Achilles back into the war in Book 9 because the Trojans, under the aegis of Apollo, are decimating his forces. In a case of wanting to have his cake and eat it, his peace offering comes with no capitulation of their relative rank. Instead, Agamemnon insists, “μοι ὑποστήτω, (let him stand beneath me) on the basis that Agamemnon is both basileúteros [more kingly] and progenésteros [older in birth] (Il. 9.160). However, according to Muellner, the mores of epic favor genealogy over relative age and so it makes little sense for Agamemnon to argue that his greater age outranks Achilles’ divine maternal lineage. Since the sense in which Agamemnon could possibly be Achilles’s better is not demonstrable, Agamemnon has no basis for his claim be the best of the Achaean, and since mēnis is inextricably linked to status, he has no right to mēnis, given that Achilles is breaking no rules by treating an inferior as his subordinate.

It is surely not by chance that Shakespeare recreates the identical dynamic between his primary protagonists from the very first of his own epic tragedy. Hamlet observes that Claudius is a drunkard and a deceiver who makes Denmark a laughing stock in the eyes of other nations. By contrast his own claims to excellence are various: he is a better swordsman than Laertes, of whom Lamord gave such a “masterly report,” and Fortinbras observes that given the chance he “would have prov’d most royal” (4.7.95, 5.2.403). His own lineage is Achillean in that his genealogy is in the same semi-divine mold as the son and heir of the other-worldly king whose
own natural gifts, as noted previously, also excelled those of Claudius. It might be supposed that
Hamlet would refuse to engage with Claudius in this struggle over relative status and who has
the right anger because he dismisses Claudius’s status as illegitimate to begin with, and indeed,
his description of his uncle as “a cutpurse of the empire” and “a king of shreds and patches”
would seem to support this view (3.4.99, 103). Such a reading ignores, however, the Dumézelian
task facing Hamlet. It is not enough to take back the crown by force: the mythic aspects of
kingship must be restored, which is to say that Hamlet has no choice but to meet Claudius on
precisely the level of status and excel him in order for sovereignty itself to be restored.

Unable to match his nephew in either quality or nature directly, the king’s path to
claiming ménis for himself must be through a surrogate who can do both. Laertes is particularly
important here because Claudius is not only able to absorb him into his solidarity group by
means of the plot against Hamlet, but he does it in such a manner that he is able to co-opt
Laertes’ righteous anger. The raging, dispossessed son of a murdered father, Laertes functions as
one of several avatars of Hamlet in the play, a position which enables him to combat Hamlet’s
claims to ménis by facing him on a morally level playing field. Ultimately, Claudius’s attempt to
counter Hamlet’s anger with that of Laertes is doomed to fail because Laertes lacks all the
Achillean accoutrements of ménis and can provide instead only kótos, which is another way of
saying that the narrative is not structurally dependent on his anger in the way that it is on
Hamlet’s.

There is no doubt that Laertes is enraged in the fourth and fifth acts, but having witnessed
the profundity of Hamlet’s anger, Claudius is forced to wonder not only if Laertes can match it
but even if it is simple theatricality. Claudius employs this latter possibility as both the prod and
the test for Laertes: “Laertes, was your father dear to you? / Or are you like the painting of a
sorrow, / A face without a heart?” (4.7.105–7). The king is perhaps right to be suspicious of a

Laertes who introduces his anger so theatrically:

How came he dead? I’ll not be juggled with.
To hell, allegiance! Vows, to the blackest devil!
Conscience and grace, to the profoundest pit!
I dare damnation. To this point I stand
That both the worlds I give to negligence.
Let come what comes, only I’ll be revenged
Most thoroughly for my father. (4.5.130–136)

This is Hamlet’s drinking hot blood at the witching hour restated – the kind of stage anger of

which Quintilian taught the Early Modern mind to be circumspect:

Nor yet again must we adopt all the gestures and movements of the actor. Within
certain limits the orator must be a master of both, but he must rigorously avoid
staginess and all extravagance of facial expression, gesture and gait. For if an
orator does command a certain art in such matters, its highest expression will be
in the concealment of its existence. (Inst. or. 3 11.3)42

Hence the entire sequence in 4.7 mirrors the interview between King Hamlet and his son in 1.5,
consisting of a series of authenticity checks: “What would you undertake / To show yourself in
deed your father’s son / More than in words?” (4.7.123–25). Each time, as Hamlet did before
him, Laertes passes the test. He would “cut his throat i’th church,” the act that Hamlet failed to
do, and in fact he has already taken action, having bought the unction “So mortal that, but dip a
knife in it, / Where it draws blood no cataplasm so rare... / can save the thing from death / That is
but scratched withal” (4.7.140–45). Claudius’s approving observation that “revenge should have
no bounds” echoes King Hamlet’s “duller shouldst thou be than the fat weed / That roots itself in
ease on Lethe wharf / Wouldst thou not stir in this” (1.5.32–34).

However, while Laertes’s circumstances are concentric with those of Hamlet, his anger is
thematically different. Claudius gives permission for Laertes’s anger to revenge, but he is

42 Quintilian, Institutio oratoria, trans. Harold Edgeworth Butler (Heinemann, 1920), Perseus Digital
Library, perseus.tufts.edu.
himself an inauthentic king, and consequently his words do not carry the Zeusian authority that
King Hamlet bestows on the prince. Mênis works to effect a restoration of social hierarchies, but
Laertes storms into Elsinore at the head of an angry mob proclaiming him king. Just as
Agamemnon’s claim to be the greatest of the Achaeans is hollow in comparison to that of
Achilles, both in lineage and in personal prowess, Laertes’s descent from the buffoonish
Polonius and his inferior fencing skills make him a poor imitation of Hamlet. Another marker of
mênis is its targeting of the group complicit with the individual, but despite the cover-up
performed by Claudius and Gertrude and the infamy of his father’s “obscure” burial without
hatchment over his bones, Claudius is fairly easily able to divert Laertes’s anger away from the
royal family as a whole. Most importantly for the structure of the play, Laertes does not
experience the inherent alienation from himself that is a primary feature of heroic mênis. The
essential difference is that Hamlet’s anger constitutes his identity within a larger-scale epic
framework. Put another way, divine anger both creates the thematic structure in which Hamlet’s
identity can exists and also creates that identity within the framework, since the two are one.

Laertes, by contrast, has a self that is constituted by theatricality and therefore could
demonstrate authenticity only within a stoic universe, not within the epic world of the Hamlet.
Hamlet’s initial response is a dramatic revealing - “This is I / Hamlet the Dane!”—a marker of
the epic hero’s arc, according to M. L. Lord. In form it constitutes an Odyssean self-
identification with the kingdom which supervenes the claim to singular national identity that
Claudius claims to Laertes in the first act: “You cannot speak of reason to the Dane / And lose
your voice. What wouldst thou beg, Laertes, / That shall not be my offer, not thy asking?”
(1.2.44–46). The doubling of Laertes and Claudius, initially as antagonists, when Laertes first
bursts into the court seeking the king’s death, and then as conspirators in the plot to kill Hamlet,
is reified also in Laertes’s name, one which he shares with the father of Odysseus. The guileful king of Ithaca is metonymic of the very deceptions that Achilles hates. Playing the Achillean role in his own drama, Hamlet’s violent reactions to artifice at various points in all five acts, from the monstrousness of the player king’s waned visage and broken voice to the fact that one may smile and smile and be a villain, put him into an oppositional relationship with Laertes on the mythic level. Ultimately, Hamlet is more than Laertes, not just because he is the royal son of Denmark but because he is self-aware of his own special nature. When Hamlet reaches for referents to understand himself, he finds them not just in the kings and heroes of the mythological past like Achilles and Hercules but in the figures from Classical history with whom he senses a kinship, Alexander and Caesar.

Hamlet’s claim to this special case of selfhood entitles him to bring his anger to bear during Ophelia’s funeral, when Claudius stokes Laertes’s rage by apparently not forewarning him of the truncated rites that the king has allowed her: “I tell thee, churlish priest, / A ministering angel shall my sister be / When thou liest howling!” (5.1.233–34). Laertes’s histrionics, jumping into the grave and opening the coffin, constitute an unacceptable challenge to the prince’s own heroic anger because although Laertes’ context affords him a Hamlet-like demeanor, his “I” is not the equal of Hamlet’s. Consequently, the prince must vigorously contest the question of who has the right to ménis:

'Swounds, show me what thou'lt do,
Woo’t weep? Woo’t fight? Woo’t fast? Woo’t tear thyself?
Woo’t drink up eisel, eat a crocodile?
I’ll do ’t. Dost thou come here to whine,
To outface me with leaping in her grave?
Be buried quick with her, and so will I.
And if thou prate of mountains let them throw
Millions of acres on us, till our ground,
Singeing his pate against the burning zone,
Make Ossa like a wart! Nay, an thou'lt mouth,
I’ll rant as well as thou. (5.1.269–79)

Far from the childish squabble over who loved Ophelia more, Hamlet’s apparently callous behavior is in fact an entirely necessary statement by the prince that he is the Achilles of his own story.

This contest of rhetoric between Hamlet and the king’s angry surrogate prefigures the physical contest between them in the fencing match to come, and the rhetorical skirmish at the gravesite manifests essentially as battle by Homeric intertext. Hamlet’s claim that he will “make Ossa like a wart” is a direct counter to Laertes’ command: “pile your dust upon the quick and dead, / Till of this flat a mountain you have made, / T'o'ertop old Pelion or the skyish head / Of blue Olympus” (5.1.244–47). Here he invokes the story told by the spirit of Iphimedeia to Odysseus, in *Odyssey* Book 11, of how her sons Otus and Ephialtes attempted to pile Mount Ossa on top of Mount Olympus and Mount Pelion on top of Ossa so that they might challenge the gods in heaven. This is Laertes’ plan to reach up into the world of Hamlet laid out in epic terms. Hamlet’s response, goading Laertes to pile mountains on them until Ossa is like a wart, signifies his willingness to contest Laertes on the level of myth.43

If in this Homeric poker game of seeing and raising, Laertes calls upon his own epic referents in the *Odyssey*, he pulls the wrong card from the epic deck. The Book 11 sequence, from which he draws the ghost of Iphimedeia’s tale of the Aloadae and their mountain building, also features an appearance by the spirits of both Agamemnon and Achilles. The former tells of his murder at the hands of his faithless wife, Clytemnestra: “she, that whore, she turned her back on me, / well on my way to death—she even lacked the heart to seal my eyes with her hand or

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43 Once again, while Shakespeare’s access to Odyssean sources is not verified, the depth of knowledge about *Odyssey* Book 11, invoked through the argument about Mount Ossa and Mount Pelion, is not in dispute.
close my jaws” (Od. 11.481–83). Agamemnon finishes his tirade by warning Odysseus about unfaithful wives. Thus Laertes undercuts his boasts of grief and anger by referencing epic tropes weighed down by the ethical baggage of Claudius—the unfaithful wife, the murdered husband, and the refusal of rites due to the dead. This same sequence in the Odyssey concludes with the ghost of Achilles himself conversing with Odysseus, returning to Elysium well satisfied after he hears that his valor, dignity, and status survive him through his son, Neoptolemus—the same Neoptolemus (as Pyrrhus) who killed Priam in the player’s speech for Hamlet’s edification. Consequently, Laertes’ epic boasts invoke a series of delegitimizing epic referents directed at himself.

A useful metacommentary on the rhetorical battle between Hamlet and Claudius’s surrogate in the graveyard scene is provided by Shakespeare’s previous play. When Brutus asks on the eve of Philippi, “Must I budge? / Must I observe you? / Must I stand and crouch under your testy humor?”, Cassius responds by backing down, a capitulation which itself engenders a de-escalation by Brutus (JC 4.3.44–46). In Hamlet the answer to Brutus’s question by all characters, Laertes and Claudius included, is most clearly yes—the anger of this observ’d of all observers must and will be observed because the structure of Hamlet’s epic world allows for no other outcomes.

XI. The Angry Self and Alienated Passivity

Logic would seem to dictate that an angry self in possession of a clearly defined and divinely authorized objective would be impelled to dynamic action, but of course Hamlet confounds this notion, with the result that critics have sought from every angle an explanation for the prince’s lengthy periods of inactivity. The answer supplied by epic is that passivity is
somewhat counterintuitive yet oddly inevitable outcome of mēnis. Muellner traces the process in the Iliad from the point at which Thetis appeals to Zeus for validation of her son’s mēnis against the Achaeans by assisting the Trojans. In acceding to her petition, the king of the gods makes the mēnis of Achilles concentric with his own divine prohibition, thereby guaranteeing this godlike anger in a mortal and making him a match for Apollo. If he were not already one to feared, Muellner explains, the rage of Achilles has now taken on a divine dimension that articulates with epic syntax, “the word mēnis [being] the formulaic complement of verbs meaning “fear,” “cast off,” “shun,” “watch out for,” and “renounce.””

These are cautions which apply as much to the originator of mēnis as to the targets of it, for this kind of anger is double-edged. Achilles himself is reflexively damaged by it, as he indicates when he says in Book 1, η ποτ’ Ἄχιλληος ποθή ἦξεται νῆας ἀχαιώνσύμπαντας – [I swear that a yearning for Achilles will come over the sons of the Achaeans, all of them put together].

Achilles’ use of the third person acknowledges his own solidarity with the other Achaeans who will regret the loss of Achilles on the battlefield and, in this way, is also a recognition that he is emptied of himself by his own heroic rage:

And sitting beside his swift-going ships he had mēnis, the Zeus-descended son of Peleus, swift-footed Achilles. Neither was he visiting the man-ennobling assembly nor was he going to war, but he was wasting away his own dear heart staying there, and he was longing for the war cry and the battle.

The hero’s own understanding that the Achilles who sits and broods by his ship is other to the Achilles who feels philótēs (friendship, kinship) with the Achaeans illustrates the insufficiencies inherent in mapping Classical emotion to contemporary equivalence through lexis. Of interest

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44 Muellner 129.
45 Ibid., 137.
46 Trans. Muellner 122.
here is the fact that it demonstrates the principle of mēnis-enforced passive alienation from the offending group, leading in turn to an alienation from the self that also has a responsibility to that group.

The part of this split psyche which still feels solidarity with the group does not disappear in the Iliad, according to Muellner, rather it reifies in Patroklos. The glory of the ancestors signified by Patroklos’s name is mapped onto Achilles through overdetermination of identification—Patroklos donning Achilles’s armor and dying in his stead at the hands of Hector. Since the two warriors are in this way two parts of the same character, both remoteness and solidarity exists in a dialectic, and it makes sense that the half which represents solidarity is sent onto the battlefield to die. However, in the epic teleology of the Iliad, the values which inhere in a tragic character, such as morality and ambiguity, do not apply. Therefore, rather than reflecting poorly on Achilles’s decision-making, the death of Patroklos is the vehicle by which Achilles achieves kléos.47 This is why Achilles at no time expresses guilt over his decision to allow Patroklos to enter the battle as his substitute which ultimately costs Patroklos his life: “[o]n deciding to send out Patroklos, his goal (μύθου τέλος, “the goal of my speech act” [116.83]) had been different: to preserve and enhance his timeō in ‘making a light’ for the fighting Achaeans (16.84–96).”48

Muellner’s contention that “Achilles’ mēnis is passive, motionless self-denial and self-restraint” could equally have been made about Hamlet.49 King Hamlet’s second visitation to whet his son’s almost blunted purpose is futile, not because the prince has forgotten his anger but

48 timē (Τιμή): worship, esteem, honour, and in pl. honours, such as are accorded to gods or to superiors, or bestowed (whether by gods or men) as a reward for services. ΛΟΓΕΙΟΝ.
49 Muellner, 161.
50 Ibid., 123.
because he is in fact too angry, and that anger forces on him a passive withdrawal from the opposing group associated with Claudius. The problem is that he recognizes solidarity with that group, which contains his love, Ophelia, his school-friends, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, his own mother, and his potential brother-in-law, Laertes, all of whom by rights should be under his protection in his role of “Hamlet, the Dane.” The passivity of the alienated self is one of the primary features of heroic anger. For his own part, Hamlet appears to be caught by surprise by the strength of the alienation that comes along with heroic anger. At the end of act one, he believed he would be the revenger who would set the time back into joint, restore order to the Danish court and that anger would be his medium. Instead, Hamlet’s alienation creates internal dissonance between who he is – the protector of family and subjects - and who he needs to be – a revenger. This form of becoming implies a sense of self that existed before his emotional interior constituted a new kind of identity.

He is angriest at the points where the dissonance becomes most unbearable to him. Not by accident from all possible speeches he could ask the player king to recite the story of Pyrrhus. In practical terms, he is literally asking for an instructive lesson in revenge and savagery drawn from the family line of Achilles. The intensity with which he needs to learn how to be a revenger is indicated by his impatience, reciting the first part of the speech himself and in snapping at Polonius’s interruption to the lesson, dismissing him because “he’s for a jig, or a tale of bawdry, or he sleeps” (2.2.438). Indeed, weightier matters are at issue for Hamlet here, specifically, just how one transcends the theatrical rhetoric of anger to actually become an Achilles or a Pyrrhus. Of course rather than proving instructional, the player’s performance simply leaves him more perplexed by the fact that “But in a fiction, in a dream of passion,” he “Could force his soul so to his own conceit / That from her working all his visage wann’d, / Tears in his eyes, distraction in
his aspect, / A broken voice” (2.2.547–50). The recognition that his anger to this point has been simply a rhetorical construct enrages him further:

Why, what an ass am I! This is most brave,
That I, the son of a dear father murder’d,
Prompted to my revenge by heaven and hell,
Must, like a whore, unpack my heart with words
And fall a-cursing like a very drab,
A scullion! Fie upon’t! Foh! (2.2.578–83)

The “fiction” of the player’s emotion strikes him as congruent with the fiction of his own anger; the “dream of passion” has been his own dream, good only for the stage actor - a complex of signifiers he pointedly rejected as being his own role in this drama, but the wrong kind of anger for a revenger. Instead, like the whore who feigns the heart’s arousal through her words, he has relied on the inauthenticity of angry declamations in place of the angry act. This of course is not a failing in Hamlet, although he perceives it to be. The “I” he refers to as being the son of a dear father murdered is the overdetermined “I”—the one that is “too much i’ the sun” in the first act: the grieving son, the disinherited son, the adopted son, and the reluctant stepson.

Authentic anger, Hamlet seems to believe, will be effected only in the act—the savage slaughter of Priam, the deaths of twenty thousand for a trick of fame—and he is most enraged where he sees his own inauthenticity reflected back at him. He warns Ophelia as much in his rejection of the love tokens, asking her, “What should such fellows as I do crawling between earth and heaven? We are arrant knaves, all, believe none of us” (3.1.128-30). Where ménis in the structure of the Iliad empowers Achilles to act or not as he sees fit because it is part of his epic destiny, the weight of its obligation in a tragic setting has a chilling effect on Hamlet’s ability to act, which paradoxically causes him to lash out wherever he sees the artifice that he perceives in himself:
I have heard of your paintings too, well enough. God has given you one face and you make yourselves another. You jig and amble, and you lisp, you nickname God’s creatures and make your wantonness your ignorance. Go to, I’ll no more on’t, it hath made me mad. (3.1.144–49)

By the mid-point of the play, the prince has become so alienated from himself that the chase to find “genuine” anger inside himself, while simultaneously protecting his investigation from prying eyes, has completely effaced the goal he set himself in act one. The scramble down the rabbit hole of the interior to find the revenger within has already happened by the time he accuses Rosencrantz and Guildenstern of duplicity: “Why, look you now, how unworthy a thing you make of me...! ’Sblood, do you think I am easier to be played on than a pipe?” (3.2.354–61).

The image of the pipe, itself, is an interesting choice. Hamlet perceives himself in the moment as a device that will play its notes only when the gale of anger blows through him, not the weak wind of interrogations by those who are his inferiors: “what replication should be made by the son of a king?” (Ham. 4.2.12–13).

When Hamlet becomes aware of the alienation from himself which marks heroic anger, he attributes it to his madness, and it is most notable after he has experienced one of his outbursts of rage. During the formalities before the fencing match, Hamlet tries in his typically self-obsessed way to explain himself for causing the rage match at Ophelia’s graveside. Of note is Shakespeare’s patterning of Hamlet’s rhetoric on the alienated language used by Achilles.

Hamlet begins with the formal apology which Gertrude has insisted upon:

Give me your pardon, sir. I’ve done you wrong.
But pardon’t as you are a gentleman.
This presence knows, and you must needs have heard,
How I am punish’d with sore distraction.
What I have done
That might your nature, honour, and exception
Roughly awake, I here proclaim was madness. (5.2.222–28)
This seems on the surface to be simple manipulation of Laertes’s “nature and honor” by admitting that his madness caused distress and insult, perhaps only to assuage Gertrude, although Hamlet has previously acknowledged regret to Horatio about the Laertes incident: “But sure the bravery of his grief did put me / Into a tow’ring passion” (5.2.79–80). Hamlet then abruptly slips into the Achillean third person, making of himself an alienated observer expressing solidarity with Laertes and the others who have suffered under Hamlet’s mad rage as he has himself has suffered.

Was’t Hamlet wrong’d Laertes? Never Hamlet.
If Hamlet from himself be ta'en away,
And when he’s not himself does wrong Laertes,
Then Hamlet does it not. Hamlet denies it.
Who does it, then? His madness. If’t be so,
Hamlet is of the faction that is wronged.
His madness is poor Hamlet’s enemy. (5.2.229–35)

Hamlet’s alienation from himself, in fact, is one of the features that marks him as an unattractive character for the New Historicist project of making autonomous essence an objectionable concept. In order for Hamlet’s anger to alienate himself from himself, he has to have a concept of self to begin with.

XII. daimoni ἵσος: Becoming King Hamlet

The solution to Hamlet’s alienation is frequently attributed to the adoption of stoicism in the fifth act, presumably learned from Horatio, leading to the more or less successful conclusion of the revenge arc, but the outcome is notable for its untidiness, and stoicism as Hamlet’s solution is ultimately an unsatisfactory explanation. The deaths of Ophelia, Gertrude, Polonius, and Laertes were not part of the King Hamlet’s original edict, yet in many ways, the old king is still directly responsible because rather than authorizing pure anger in the prince, as Zeus does to
Achilles, King Hamlet actually transmits a variety of emotions and each with its own implied task. These injunctions - most obviously that Gertrude’s punishment is not to be by Hamlet’s hand—convolute the prince’s path to revenge. Revenge against Claudius is clearly the primary Zeusian directive to assuage the old king’s anger, but he is also filled with a mixture of fear, jealousy, and self-pity that his reign and his life have apparently left no mark on the kingdom or in the queen’s affection. His last words to the prince are not a final exhortation to revenge but rather the pleading “remember me.” The prince receives the message loud and clear: “Remember thee? / Ay, thou poor ghost, whiles memory holds a seat / In this distracted globe. Remember thee?” Revenge enacted by slaying Claudius is to be convergent with the restoration of the king’s legacy and memory in the minds of those who have forgotten him. At the ghost’s departure, Hamlet’s first thought is of that “pernicious woman,” and only secondarily does he think of the “smiling damned villain!” (1.5.91, 95-97, 105–06).

This is the source of the anger that Hamlet brings with him to Gertrude’s closet – an episode during which his rage seems almost unhinged in its intensity. Here Hamlet is closest to becoming his god (daimoni ἴσος) as he channels not his own feelings but the disappointment, rage, and fear of his divine father. The stichomythic exchange immediately upon his entry is Hamlet’s signal that this will be a didactic lesson in re-membering, literally a putting back together of the pieces of his father that have been discarded.

QUEEN. Hamlet, thou hast thy father much offended.
HAMLET. Mother, you have my father much offended.
QUEEN. Come, come, you answer with an idle tongue.
HAMLET. Go, go, you question with a wicked tongue.
QUEEN. Why, how now, Hamlet!
HAMLET. What’s the matter now?
QUEEN. Have you forgot me?
HAMLET. No, by the rood, not so.
You are the Queen, your husband's brother's wife,
And, would it were not so, you are my mother. (3.4.8–15)
Hamlet’s mode of thinking about selfhood here colors his strategy once the lesson begins, and he expects her to be a reluctant student: “You shall not budge. / You go not till I set you up a glass / Where you may see the inmost part of you” (3.4.17–19). However, Hamlet’s conceptualization of what the inmost part of a wife looks like is expressed not to Gertrude in her closet, but later in his mocking rationale for calling Claudius his mother: “My mother. Father and mother is man and wife. Man and wife is one flesh; so, my mother” (4.3.54–55). The implication then is that Gertrude’s crime is not so much the betraying of her husband for a pair of reechy kisses, although that is a source of ire, but a forgetting of the self—a forgetting of identity.

Here the concerns of father and son become blurred once more. For the prince who has struggled to maintain his own sense of himself in the face of an anger that works in the opposite direction, Gertrude’s willing abandonment of that precious quantity is unendurable, lending the irony with which he tells her that he has certainly not “forgot her” as she has done to herself. Beyond the rhetorical posturing and comparisons of miniatures, Hamlet’s assault on his mother at heart is a critique of what it means to lose oneself. As he anticipates, Gertrude is resistant. Looking for the lost self is a vertiginous experience, and she begs, “O Hamlet, speak no more. / Thou turn’st my very eyes into my soul” (3.4.88–89). At its core the closet scene is an exploration of the epimeleia heautoú [care of the self]: the central idea in Socratic (Platonic) ethics, that the individual should look to tending the soul by cultivating virtue rather than seeking reputation or material goods. Unfortunately, although he successfully helps his mother to recover identity, the alienating effects of ménis conspire to make Hamlet lose himself at almost the same point in the narrative.

Hamlet is ultimately able to reorder his social group rather than choose one over the other, bringing his mother back into solidarity with himself and the divine father. In this sense, Hamlet is a play which almost becomes an epic, since Hamlet comes very close to restoring order to the Olympian hierarchy at Elsinore and restoring Dumézil’s three pillars of society to solid foundations. However, Hamlet’s universe, while epic in structure, is tragic in nature, and although his anger response can be seen as having a similar thematic function to that of the Iliad, the tragic prince does not have the luxury of escaping moral outcomes associated with his actions. Ophelia, Polonius, and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are not Patroklos, Diomedes, and Hector. Therefore, lacking heroic destinies of their own, their deaths are complicit with Hamlet’s rage, but unlike the deaths associated with the wrath of Achilles, not excused by it. This, in part, is why Hamlet engages in so much emotional hand-wringing, which he covers up with apocalyptic rhetoric and self-destructive introspection.

In killing Claudius, even at the cost of his own life, Hamlet becomes daimoni ἰσος, equaling the feats of the divine king who defeated old Fortinbras in single combat and reunifying the alienated self. As has been pointed out by several commentators, Hamlet contains two Hamlets – the moping, paralyzed alienated philosopher of the first four acts, and the dynamic fatalist of the fifth act who fights the pirates and sends his school friends to their deaths without a second thought. This second Hamlet is able to reflect on the first Hamlet as Achilles does on Patroklos: “Sir, in my heart there was a kind of fighting / That would not let me sleep. Methought I lay / Worse than the mutines in the bilboes” (5.2.5–6). Symbolically, Laertes becomes the first Hamlet, the enraged, alienated son of a murdered father, when the first Hamlet vacates that space in 4.5. Hamlet’s exchange of forgiveness with Laertes, after they have both achieved their revenges, therefore becomes reflexive in that the Hamlet who accepts philótēs
reunifies with the Hamlet who was alienated. The existence of such a unification in *Hamlet* denies Barker’s premise that a split psyche that can observe itself from a cognitive distance does not exist until the time of Pepys.

In his dying moments of the fifth act, Hamlet jettisons the stoicism that he briefly borrowed from Horatio at the beginning of the fifth act—a brand of stoicism that is firmly Ciceronian in its ability to make a person “As one in suff’ring all, that suffers nothing, / A man that Fortune’s buffets and rewards / Hast ta'en with equal thanks” (3.2.65–68). In its place, Hamlet embraces a vision of himself that is appropriately tragic but also starkly mythic. It is the epic view of Achilles, who embraces his destiny, wreaking havoc on the Trojans, and saving the Achaeans, aware that in so doing he will be destroyed but secure that he will enter myth. Sacrificing the private self that he has fought so hard to protect is worth saving a kingdom, Hamlet concludes. He seems to end in the same position as his father, forced to plead with another to remember him: “If thou didst ever hold me in thy heart,” he begs Horatio, “Absent thee from felicity awhile, / And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain / To tell my story” (5.2.352–54). However, the comparison is deceiving: the story that will be told about the prince is not that of an old man who died while asleep in his orchard but of one who destroyed royal knavery and purged a corrupt court at great personal cost. King Hamlet’s story is a sad one, but the tale of Prince Hamlet which Horatio will tell is mythic. Outside of an epic structure, the demands of *ménis* and its ability to dissolve identity—to empty out the self as Achilles was emptied out—leaves the individual vulnerable to chaotic forces. This is why Hamlet gives his dying word to Fortinbras, who has been only on the periphery of his perception until the final scene. The Norwegian prince has been angry, but not divinely so—not on a par with the rage of Achilles. Unhampered by the alienation of Homeric anger, Fortinbras retains a coherent interior.
This allows him to be like Horatio, one “Whose blood and judgment are so well commeddled / That they are not a pipe for Fortune’s finger / To sound what stop she please,” and thus fit to rule (3.2.69-71).

XIII. The Angry Self Becomes the Mythic Self

Although the play presents many avatars of Hamlet, the only two who are actually true analogues to him in terms of an authentically angry interior linked to devastating socially corrective violence are Pyrrhus and Fortinbras. These two, taken together with Hamlet, himself, represent a departure from the angry characters of the other tragedies because Shakespeare does not conceive of them as a choleric in the mold of Cassius or Mercutio. Instead of possessing humoral excess, they are vessels suitable for receiving a greater anger which is divine or semi-divine in its ordinance. Fortinbras, for example, does not demonstrate ménis because the play does not ask it of him, but the audience is left in little doubt that he could if called upon to do so. The commonality between these characters is that they are strong, lordly figures capable of immense violence—Fortinbras’s name is a compound of the French for “strong” and “arm.” More in particular, however, they are intensely self-aware of their own capacity for greatness, and they jealously and fiercely protect that quality from others who would try to assimilate it for personal vantage. Laertes’ willing acquiescence to the king’s plot to deploy his anger against Hamlet marks him as an almost Hamlet—a failed Hamlet, victim of an inauthentic lineage which cannot contain an anger as potent as ménis.

The view that a self-aware greatness joined to a noble lineage is the marker of a self that can reach beyond choler and theatricality to authentically real anger, of course, makes Hamlet a royalist hero. Fortinbras, recognizing one of his own like, explicitly acknowledges as much: “Let
four captains / Bear Hamlet like a soldier to the stage, / For he likely, had he been put on, / To have proved most royal” (5.2.400–03). Royalism by itself is not a guarantee of anything, however, unless it is marked by self-knowledge, and this is the source of the prince’s distemper. There is no search for self-knowledge in the *Iliad* because it is a story of being, not of becoming. Achilles already knows who he is and what the cost will be to others who refuse to acknowledge what he already knows about his own greatness:

> But then Atrides,  
> harrowed as you will be, nothing you can do can save you –  
> not when your hordes of fighters drop and die,  
> cut down by the hands of man-killing Hector! Then –  
> then you will tear your heart out, desperate, raging  
> that you disgraced the best of the Achaeans. (*Iliad* 1.282–87)52

Achilles does not introspect in the way Hamlet does, not because he necessarily lacks the facility, but because he lacks the necessity. Like Fortinbras Hamlet reaches the same place but by a different path, the calm acceptance that there’s a divinity shapes his ends, rough-hew them how he will. He does have a heroic destiny, one achievable through the fatalistic acceptance of things he cannot change: “If it be now, ’tis not to come; if it be not to come, it will be now; if it be not now, yet it will come” (5.2.216–18). The readiness is all because experience has shown him that what he will leave betimes after his own death is clay to patch a wall or stop a beer-barrel.

By the last act, however, this is not a source of distress to him in the way it is in the first four acts. Returning to the clay is the actualization of his desire to thaw, melt and resolve into a dew, a consummation that is not just devoutly to be wished for but an inevitable stage through which he must pass if he is to enter into myth like Achilles. Unleashing his heroic anger on the court of King Claudius becomes finally acceptable because doing so is his doorway into the dissolution he has longed for without knowing why. Ophelia in her madness points to this truth

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when she says “Lord, we know what we are, but know not what we may be” (4.5.43–44),
echoing 1 John 3.2: “What we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when
he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is.” This is the state of Hamlet in
the first four acts—to use Lee’s phrase in a different context - not being but becoming: not aware
of his own greatness but searching for that awareness. He searches not for identity—he has that
already—but for a specific kind of mythic identity with which he shares an affinity, the type of
identity to which he constantly appeals in his favored Classical rhetoric: Pyrrhus and Hercules,
Alexander and Caesar.

2001).
Chapter 3

When the Bad Bleeds, Then Is the Tragedy Good

I. Theatrical Interiors: The Narrative Self and the Declamatory Self

*Hamlet* is a tragedy which both looks back nostalgically to the *memento mori* of Yorick’s skull and forward to the modern concept of a private interior hidden from public gaze. These concerns, which play out as a struggle between authenticity and theatrics, mark *Hamlet* as a transitional text—one that bridges the gap between the last holdovers of Mediaevalism and the increasing intrusion of the public into the private. There is, of course, no way to know the extent to which Shakespeare in 1600 looked with trepidation toward the new century under a 67 year-old, childless queen, if indeed he did at all. Nevertheless, the issues which permeate *Hamlet* are marked by anxieties about the surveillance state and the façade necessary to safely meet it, the roots of which the New Historicists place in the early sixteenth century.

The prince of Denmark’s preoccupation with play-acting typically manifests as frustration that his anger, rather than driving him on to find the name of action, continually sends him down (what is to him) the blind alley of theatrics. As discussed in the previous chapter, he is eventually able to shrug off theatricality through his discovery that the cost of an Achillean outcome is willingness to embrace the mythic self by submitting to the destruction the private self. If Hamlet finds stoicism on the way to embracing a mythic conception of himself, it is certainly in the Ciceronian mode, which is to say that by enduring hardship he can attempt to engage external, repressive power structures and bring them to moral order. However, the focus of contemporary criticism on the modern aspects of the text have worked to obscure the fact that
its Ciceronianism is also a marker of *Hamlet*’s backward-looking interior model. Such an outcome is possible because the tropes of epic can still operate in the sixteenth century—a culture which, like the prince himself, retains a mythic sense of its own identity.

Concurrent with the rise of the Stuart monarchies in the early part of the seventeenth century, a new model of selfhood takes shape - one which rejects Cicero and embraces instead the Senecan model of stoicism. Now, the purpose of stoicism is not to counter tyranny but to ape it. As C.A.J. Littlewood puts it, in Neronian Rome, “[s]toic criticism, which finds its characteristic form in paradox and negation and depends on an individual’s will to defy public, conventional values, echoes the absolute autonomy of a tyrant.”¹ Unlike Cicero’s stoic philosophy, which seeks to serve the public good, Seneca’s brand advocates withdrawal from the corrupt public sphere completely, as Seneca attempted to do by leaving Nero’s court and the chaos that Rome had become generally. This chapter examines two plays which offer models of the interior firmly in the Senecan mold - grotesquely cruel, stoically isolationist, and consequently, intensely theatrical. Thomas Middleton’s *The Revenger’s Tragedy* (c.1606) examines the stoic’s ability to narrate the self, and John Webster’s *The Duchess of Malfi* (1612–13) engages with declamatory interior for which Seneca’s own tragedies are synonymous.

While both Middleton and Webster revel in the very theatricality that Hamlet finds to be a barrier to the authentic self, each puts a slightly different valence this inevitable outcome of Senecan stoicism. Middleton’s Vindice seizes on the opportunity to generate what might be called a “narrative self,” in which the accoutrements of society can be repurposed to serve the story, quite apart from their role as cultural signifiers. The philosophical weight behind Hamlet’s graveside monologue on mortality, for example, would dissolve into farce if he were to suddenly

decide to employ Yorick’s skull as a prop in his revenge plan, yet that is what Vindice decides to do with Gloriana’s skull:

I have not fashion'd this only for show
And useless property; no, it shall bear a part
E'en in [its] own revenge.
[Applies poison to the skull's mouth.]  
This very skull,
Whose mistress the duke poisoned, with this drug,
The mortal curse of the earth, shall be reveng'd
In the like strain, and kiss his lips to death. (3.5.100–06)²

His words dismissively acknowledge that Yorick’s skull was a stage property of Burbage’s acting troupe and of no use value beyond signification, but Vindice exults that Gloriana’s skull will be revenge in and for itself. If *Hamlet* is a play about becoming the most autonomous agent the exterior world will allow, *The Revenger’s Tragedy* is a play about maximizing the potential of the script. This is the stoic conceit in dramatic form – the illusory nature of the physical world reducing agency to set of gestures that carry no weight beyond the gestures themselves.

Written about six years later, *The Duchess of Malfi* offers a different outcome from largely the same starting point. Here, the stoic self does not redirect its rage at the world by attempting to modify a script which is illusory anyway, but rather it resists the suppressive nature of the exterior through irruptive statements of identity which constitute a “declamatory self.” This involves reduction of that self to the name which contains within itself the stoic inner world, a fact lost on tyrants like Ferdinand, as evinced by his question to his sister, “is it true thou art but a bare name, / And no essential thing?” Ferdinand’s gibe suggests a lack of understanding not only of what constitutes an “essential thing” but also of his inability recognize that his own inner

self cannot be contained and is on view to the world in the form of his lycanthropy (*Malfi* 3.2.72–73).\(^3\) Ferdinand, consequently, represents the anti-stoic.

II. The Authenticity of Myth versus the Theatrical Present

The ways in which seventeenth-century society perceived itself as somehow different from Elizabethan predecessor are diffuse and of course did not begin with the accession of James in 1603, but they certainly accelerated under his reign. Just as the writers of Seneca’s first-century imperiate were aware of themselves as being, in some sense, “a time after,” the Jacobean age is marked by a nostalgia for a time that has slipped away. A comparison of James’s triumphant progresses through the streets of London with Elizabeth’s progress a generation before is useful in understanding the mythologizing process that was well underway even before the new king arrived in England.

A society which seeks to cultivate its own mythic reality, in the manner of the Tudors, also cultivates the seeds of its own degeneration into show, and to an extent, the Jacobians are inheritors of this late feature of Elizabeth’s reign. The metonym for this paradox is Elizabeth herself, presenting to the people as the bejeweled virgin, Gloriana, who signals in her own being the mythos of the Tudor dynasty but who inescapably brings with that mythos the show of the theatrical - the carnivále of the regional tour, the showpiece execution, the extravagant masque. However they may perceive themselves in the moment, mythic societies are to a great extent constituted by the nostalgia of their successors. From the very beginning, the new Jacobean monarch signaled that his court would look to the Tudor era for its legitimacy, but in the end James managed to appropriate only its semiology and by so doing, confirmed the myth Tudor

culture attempted to create for itself. Signs of this process became evident as soon as he embarked on his journey from Edinburgh to London after receiving news of the queen’s death and his own accession. By the time he reached Berwick, on the English border, he had decided to write to the English Privy Council asking that Anna be sent “such Jewells and other furnyture that did appertaine to the late Queene” (122). Sir John Fortescue, in charge of the Great wardrobe, refused to send the queen’s regalia, a response setting the tenor that would come to characterize the Stuart monarchies - a longing for an increasingly mythologized past that was close at hand but paradoxically forever out of reach.

Given the resistance to the Scottish interloper from various members of Elizabeth’s court who felt their positions under threat, it is predictable that James would be received in London as a foreigner. Consequently, it was in his interest to assimilate the propriety of his predecessor’s Englishness, but scholars like Neil Cuddy, Jonathan Goldberg, Lianda de Lisle, and Murray Pittock suggest that the new king quickly embarked on a far more profound engagement with reclaiming the myths of the past. In his discussion of James’s reorganization and reconstitution of the Royal House, Cuddy concludes

James’s eventual successful insistence on retaining the Tudor Court, along with the Tudor fiscal prerogatives, [is] frozen in the middle of the previous century, with two additions: a curious (and highly questionable) reinvented Privy Chamber, and an exploitation of the Bedchamber for administration, patronage, and finance without close parallel since the ‘Great Age of the Household’ in the fourteenth century.  

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4 The Progresses, Processions, and Magnificent Festivities of King James the First, His Royal Consort, Family and Court, ed. John Nichols, 4 vols. (J. B. Nichols 1828), archive.org/details/progressesproce01nihgoog.

Murray Pittock adds, “Whether overtly or implicitly, James was continuing to move the iconography of Stuart monarchy towards the idealisation of Elizabeth south of the border.”6 This of course is not to suggest that Elizabeth herself was unaware of the power of mythmaking or that she did not maximize its potential to generate the authority she needed to fill the void created by the lack of a standing army.

Goldberg describes her 1558/59 procession through London as an elaborate show of love between monarch and subjects: “And on thither side, her Grace, by holding up her handes, and merie countenaunce to such as stode nigh to her Grace, did declare herself no lesse thankefulle to receive her peoples good wyll, than they lovingly offered it unto her.”7 Through the queen’s holy rule, signified by the apparently spontaneous kissing of her Bible in response to the shouts of the people, and her willingness to play the role of bride to the city-as-groom, she “fit into the frame of the pageants, made herself its mirror and its exemplification.”8 The fact that Elizabeth partly paid for the pageants and approved the costumes does not detract from a relationship with the populace that Goldberg characterizes as “co-partners in the spectacle,” given that “it is not, finally, easy to separate their desires, or to judge what is prescribed, what spontaneous, in the show of love in the streets of London.”9

In 1604 James recreated exactly, street by street, Elizabeth’s pageant through London but this time, erecting triumphal arches in the Roman tradition to mark the procession’s stages and adding more elaborately mythologized speeches, supplied by Dekker, Jonson, and Middleton. In Goldberg’s view James’s entry to the procession was “a pointed contrast [to that of Elizabeth]

7 Jonathan Goldberg, James I and the Politics of Literature (Johns Hopkins UP, 1983) qtd. in 29.
8 Ibid., 30.
9 Ibid.
even as continuity by recreation was affirmed.” The sexual symbolism was now inverted: James playing the ravishing groom and London the submissive bride. In his *Nugae Antiquae*, Sir John Harington says of the two monarchs, “Your Queen did talk of her subjects love and good affections, and in good truth, she aimed well; our King talketh of his subjects fear and subjection.” (1:395). In considering the differences between the two courts, Harington goes on to say,

> I have much marvalled at these strange pagentries, and they do bring to my remembrance what passed of this sort in our Queens days; of which I was sometime an humble presenter and assistant: but neer did I see such lack of good order, discretion, and sobriety, as I have now done…. I will now, in good sooth, declare to you, who will not blab, that the gunpowder fright is got out of all our heads, and we are going on, hereabouts, as if the devil were contriving every man shoud blow up himself by wild riot, excess, and devastation of time and temperance. (1:352)

The conspicuous excess of which Harington complains is to become one of the hallmarks of the Stuart monarchy, especially by comparison with Elizabeth’s relatively tight control of the royal purse strings. Ultimately, lacking the English heritage of Elizabeth and the legitimacy derived from being a scion of Henry VIII, James’s attempts to conflate his own rule with that of the virgin queen resulted only in confirmation of the fact that an era had passed.

If the Tudor mind benefitted from being able to define itself as the apex of political, religious, and artistic advancement after a perceived dark age of ignorance, Jacobean writers faced the unenviable task of finding a new voice distinguishable from an antecedent that was fast being regarded as a golden age. Clearly, as men who were already established authors in the final years of Elizabeth’s reign, the likes of Dekker, Webster, and Middleton would have perceived

10 Ibid.
12 Ibid.
greater continuity of experience than what we might be tempted to assign to writers living through this simultaneous dynastic and fin de siècle change. However, even if they did not feel abrupt cultural disjunctures, the tonal and structural changes apparent in early seventeenth-century dramaturgy suggest an awareness that society was becoming less coherent and more unpredictable than before. The framework that allowed for fatalistic heroism in the Iliadic model characteristic of Hamlet was rapidly deconstructing itself. Gone too was the opportunity for rhetorical self-fashioning in the style of Cicero, which requires a stable social network of established values out of which to generate itself—the Republic, in Cicero’s case. While the older vision of self persisted in some of the works of Shakespeare, it could be argued that his exceptionality is a feature of his fondness for the medieval and it puts his early Jacobean plays out of step with those of his younger contemporaries. That said, even Shakespeare comes eventually to examine radically different senses of self in his last plays such as Macbeth (c.1606) and The Tempest (1610–11) than those offered in Hamlet and Caesar.

It is perhaps the case that Webster and Middleton, being fifteen years younger than Shakespeare and, notably, both London men, resonated with the changes in the air sooner than the provincially born Shakespeare. Certainly, they could not have been unaware of the shape those changes were taking. James’s court suffered from a problem that no monarch’s had before in that the early seventeenth century witnessed an enormous growth in the volume and variety of media forms circulating around what Alastair Bellany characterizes as, “a virtually unpolicied literary underground, spreading effectively uncensored and highly damaging images of the court to a geographically broad and socially variegated public.”

Bellany, were the verse libels, anonymously written manuscripts posted in public places, copied into commonplace books, recited in the streets, or passed around the dinner table.

The power of verse libel to affect or even create public opinion is illustrated by the case of Robert Carr, a young Scot who had become a favorite of the king, but who ultimately became implicated in an affair with Frances Howard, wife of the Earl of Essex. Although Frances eventually received an annulment, a deluge of verse libels called into question the court’s issuance of such, which seemed designed to satisfy a married woman’s lucts. The libels depicted Carr himself as morally and professionally unqualified to be a courtier. In light of some convoluted intrigue involving the supposed poisoning of Overbury, who had been instrumental in Carr’s political rise, both Carr and his wife were placed on trial for murder. The scandal became symptomatic of the way in which the public viewed James’s court:

The libels and scandals figured the Jacobean court as a sink of corruption, a place where monarch and courtier alike were ruled by passion; where lust, greed, and ambition triumphed; where base men and unruly women slipped the bonds of patriarchal authority; where favorites dabbled in magic and demonic witchcraft, and succumbed to the lures of Antichristian Rome; where the culture of display manifested in only a deadly pride; where poison – the most frightening, the most foreign, and the most courtly of murderous techniques – was the king.\textsuperscript{14}

The social energy resulting from this picture of the early Jacobean court played out over and over again in the public imagination, not only in the many broadsheets, libels, and pamphlets of the day, but on the public space of the stage. The extent to which the scandal rags of the period represented the reality of James’s rule can be disputed, but in the public mind at least, it was a far cry from the adoration shown to Elizabeth in her pageants and processions just a few decades before.

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 122.
III. Medea and Senecan Stoicism

It is then unsurprising that in combatting their own crisis of indefiniteness, tragedians of the early seventeenth century find resonance not with the heroic ages of Homer’s Greece or Cato’s Republic but with a cultural anxiety of influence emblematic of Seneca’s Imperiate. In Seneca’s universe, anger at the increasingly unpredictable and arbitrary outer world no longer leads to dynamic change, because the model of selfhood that made such outcomes possible remains attached to a Republic that has already receded into myth and is beyond recoverability. To fill the resulting void, the individual in Senecan (and later, Jacobean) drama rejects the outer world as illusory and retreats to the coherent interior. With the outer world now literally become a stage on which inauthentic behaviors are as valid as any other, a virtue is made of what was formerly a vice, and theatricality becomes the message rather than the medium. In a world where morality has become simply the residue of power and the people are offered only a spectator’s rather than a participant’s role in the mythmaking of the country, offering up authenticity is absurd and playing along is the only logical response.

Littlewood points out that during the final death throes of the Roman Republic, Caesar himself acknowledged this world to come when he exhorted his troops before the Battle of Pharsalus, saying, “haec acies victum factura nocentem est [this day shall prove / Whose quarrel juster: for defeat is guilt / To him on whom it falls.].” Thus, truth, ethics, and morality cease to be Platonic ideals but are revealed to be only the arbitrary constructs of authority: “Si pro me patriam ferro flammisque petistis, Nunc pugnate truces gladioque exolvite culpam: Nulla manus, belli mutato iudice, pura es [If in my cause / With fire and sword ye did your country wrong, / Strike for acquittal! Should another judge / This war, not Caesar, none were blameless
found (Lucan, *The Civil War* VII.260-63)].\(^{15}\) Caesar’s words are astonishingly prescient of the world men like himself are ushering in, and indeed, he could be paraphrasing Medea herself:

> Now, O most high Jupiter, thunder throughout thy heavens, stretch forth thy hand, thine avenging flames prepare, rend the clouds and make the whole world quake. Let thy bolts be poised with hand that chooseth neither me nor him; whichever of us falls will perish guilty; against us thy bolt can make no error. (*Med. 531*)\(^{16}\)

This paradox of making the self morally pure by shedding blood, says Littlewood, is the dividing line between the world into which Seneca is born and the superficially similar context of Cicero.\(^{17}\)

During the tyranny of the Julio-Claudian emperors, under whose rule Seneca spent his entire existence, life is easily characterized as a form of death and the leaving of it a kind of freedom. The stoic response in the interim is to accept the physical world as illusion. Such an approach lends itself to the artifice of Senecan tragedy which becomes the hallmark of Jacobean plays – dramatic worlds of sadism, spectacle, and wonder, within which the characters are intensely aware of their own artificiality. This kind of stoicism differs from Greek and earlier Roman philosophy not only in its isolationism but also in its magnification of the self. Epicurus claimed that a friend is another version of the self, but the inflated nature of the Senecan stoic does not allow for friendship. It swells to become a contestation to the illusory world outside, expressed in stichomythic dialogue where characters speak at each other in declamations rather than to each other in conversation, a feature that Eliot famously described as “characters speak[ing] in one voice and at the top of it.”\(^{18}\)

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\(^{17}\) Littlewood (2004).

Cicero’s stoicism operates in an ethical universe and so, while it offers a safe refuge in times when the exterior resists negotiation, withdrawal to the self does not imply rejection of the outer world—simply a retreat to a place where the resources of the self can be better accessed. The ultimate goal, however, is always to reengage with the exterior world and bring it back into alignment. Cicero never accepts that the Republic is over, only that it is temporarily disabled. By this reasoning, if Hamlet briefly embraces stoicism at the beginning of act five before abandoning it for a mythic conception of himself, it is Cicero’s stoicism which can bring Denmark back into joint. Just as Cicero can still call on his conception of a mythologized Roman democracy, Shakespeare can still call upon the coherence of the Elizabethan era in which to situate his prince and the world he inhabits. For Seneca, however, with the Republic forever out of reach, a radically different kind of stoicism is required to combat the incoherence of his first-century, Julio-Claudian world—a stoicism with which the playwrights of the Stuart era found more resonance than they did with the philosophy of Cicero.

Born just before the turn of the millennium in Cordoba to a wealthy equestrian family in the reign of Augustus, Lucius Annaeus Seneca, also known as Seneca the Younger, was like Cicero, a novus homo, but for Seneca, who lived through the tyranny of the Julio-Claudian emperors Tiberius, Caligula, and Claudius, the Republic was a mythic past he could never experience. What is known about Seneca comes from the Roman historian Tacitus, writing about fifty years after Seneca’s death, and from Cassius Dio and Suetonius, writing about fifty years beyond Tacitus. Seneca’s early political success, rising to the office of praetor, was cut short by the emperor Claudius, who exiled him to Corsica for eight years for an adulterous affair with the emperor’s niece. During this time Seneca wrote extensively on stoic philosophy and rhetoric. He was recalled in 49 CE thanks to the lobbying of Claudius’s wife, Julia Agrippina.
After Claudius’s poisoning in 54, Agrippina’s son, Nero, was established as emperor and Seneca installed as Nero’s tutor and advisor along with the praetorian prefect, Sextus Afranius Burrus. After the first year, Seneca’s influence over Nero waned and when Burrus died, he became an increasing target of criticism from Nero’s advisors for his wealth and lifestyle. To disentangle himself from the corruption at court, Seneca received permission to go into retirement at his country estates. He was implicated in the failed Pisonian conspiracy against Nero in 65 CE, and consequently the emperor ordered him to commit suicide. Surrounded by a few friends and slaves, he opened the veins in his arms and knees. The bleeding being too slow, he was then brought hemlock. When this also failed, he was carried to a bath where he sprinkled his audience with water as a libation to Jupiter Liberator and (according to Tacitus) died from blood loss and suffocation by steam.19

From this world of the imperium, Seneca learns that the stoic can no longer hope to draw comfort and resources from the interior to effect a moral reordering of the exterior. Instead, nihilism replaces hope, and the heroes of tragedy do not retreat into the self as refuge but, instead, substitute that self for the despised outer world which is rejected completely. In the Mediaeval period, Seneca the tragedian and Seneca the philosopher were treated as though they were different authors. The rejection of the material world in favor of a retreat to the (Christian) self was of use, where the bleak violence and nihilism of the plays was not. By the time of Middleton and Webster’s Jacobean tragedies, Seneca’s outlook had gained a timeliness, and the friction between the stoic philosopher and the nihilistic tragedian disappeared.

For Seneca the destruction of social and ethical coherence by royal caprice in turn dissolves the coherence of the self, and this is the wellspring for his isolationist brand of

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stoicism. Medea identifies this phenomenon of kingly absolutism as the source not only of her personal misery but also of the bonds which make society comprehensible: “The fault is Creon’s, all, who with unbridled sway dissolves marriages, tears mothers from their children, and breaks pledges bound by straitest oath” (Med. 137). The demands of such a bleak universe tend to degrade the self and force it to relinquish any pretense at ethical behaviors because they cease to work. No one is exempt from this process, and Medea perceives the crimes she has committed for Jason—killing her brother and tricking Pelias’s daughters into boiling their father—to be a compromising of herself that has yielded nothing: “Add flight, theft, a deserted father, a mangled brother, any crime which e’en now the bridegroom is teaching his new wives—‘tis no crime of mine. Full oft have I been made guilty, but never for myself” (Med. 272). In the Senecan world, therefore, there is no innocence, only varying degrees of culpability, a fact Medea reminds Jason, telling him that her sins are “thine own; who profits by a sin has done the sin” (500).

Medea’s attempts to accommodate this truth are useless because the exterior world makes impossible demands on her such that she cannot remain in the center of even this fallen environment. When Jason urges her to obey Creon’s order that she go into exile, she decries the paradox into which she is being forced:

> Shall I seek Phasis and the Colchians, my father’s kingdom, the fields drenched with my brother’s blood? What lands dost thou bid me seek? What waters dost show to me? The jaws of the Pontic sea through which I brought back the noble band of princes, following thee, thou wanton, through the Clashing Rocks? Is it little Iolcos or Thessalian Tempe I shall seek? All the ways which I have opened for thee I have closed upon myself. Whither dost send me back? Thou imposest exile on an exile, but givest no place. (Med. 447)

If Medea is able to elicit sympathy at any point in the play sympathy, this is the moment.

However, the desperate situation in which she finds herself leads to despair only as a bridge to the ultimate adoption of Senecan stoicim. Given the impossibility of negotiating with a universe
that offers only cruelty and the arbitrary decisions of overwhelming authority, the Senecan stoic does not find new strength from the interior to re-engage but rejects absolutely such an unacceptable environment, even if this means embracing death as a form of freedom:

NURSE. No hope points out a way for our broken fortunes.
MEDEA. Whoso has naught to hope, let him despair of naught.

NURSE. Thou’lt die.
MEDEA. I wish it. (Med. 162–70)

This is the stoic solution Medea offers to Jason when he attempts to defend his rejection of her in favor of Creusa, Creon’s daughter, by reminding her of the crimes Medea committed to save him from Pelias. When he claims, “Unwelcome is life which one is ashamed to have accepted,” Medea counters, “Then one should not keep a life which he is ashamed to have accepted” (Med. 504–05).

The desirability of death over a compromised life is only one tool of the stoic, however. That life can be escaped also by resorting to the self-reliant interior as a coherent world which is governable in a way that the exterior is not. As Seneca famously says, “the greatest empire is the empire of the self” (Epistles 113.30). Unlike the Ciceronian stoic, the Senecan stoic can use the self not just as a refuge from the outer world but as a replacement. This gives the stoic unlimited power, and Medea indicates such to the nurse when confronted with the complete breakdown of all bonds which previously defined her.

NURSE. The Colchians are no longer on thy side, thy husband’s vows have failed, and there is nothing left of all thy wealth.
MEDEA. Medea, is left – in her thou beholdest sea and land, and sword and fire and gods and thunderbolts.

NURSE. Medea,
MEDEA. Will I be. (164–71)

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This power can only be achieved by the casting of everything that is not self, all other sources and forms of definition which do not come from the interior. In the case of the pagan Medea, this means disowning motherhood, resulting in a moment of vacillation between the Medea she was and the stoic Medea she will become:

Horror has smit my heart! My limbs are numb with cold and my heart with terror flutters. Wrath has given place; the mother has all come back, the wife is banished. Can I shed my children’s, my own offspring’s blood? Ah, mad rage, say not so! Far, even from me, be that unheard-of deed, that accursed guilt! What sin will the poor boys atone? Their sin is that Jason is their father, and, greater sin, that Medea is their mother. [She pauses.] Let them die, they are none of mine; let them be lost – they are my own. (Med. 926–32)

The Senecan substitution of the interior for the despised exterior is a solution which disables the Ciceronian view because the outer world is reduced to mere illusion—an inferior and disposable quantity. In effect, once the bonds with it are completely broken, there is nothing left beyond shadows that would make a return possible.

Freed from the demands of the compromised exterior, the stoic self wreaks destruction on the world that restricted it in the first place. In Seneca’s dramaturgy this manifests as the stylistic devices for which he is famed and often criticized. The characters speak in stichomythic dialogue, talking at each other rather than with each other, punctuated by theatrical declamations of self couched in apocalyptic rhetoric, as Medea does:

No whirling river, no storm-tossed sea, no Pontus, raging beneath the north-west wind, no violence of fire, fanned by the gale, could imitate the onrush of my wrath. I shall lay prostrate and destroy all things.

The only calm for me – if with me I see the universe o’erwhelmed in ruins; with me let all things pass away. ‘Tis sweet to drag others down when thou art perishing.

My grief grows again and my hate burns hot; Erinys, as of old, claims my unwilling hand. O wrath, where thou dost lead I follow. I would that from my womb the throng of proud Niobe had sprung, and that I had been the mother of
twice seven sons! Too barren have I been for vengeance – yet for my brother and my father there is enough, for I have borne two sons. (Med. 397–98, 426–27, 945–48)

Indeed, this is the source of the intense theatricality which marks the Senecan stoic. If the world beyond the boundaries of the self is merely shadow and artifice, a stage play where nothing matters, actions perfumed there are by necessity the actions of a player on a stage:

to thee is brandished the gloomy branch from the Stygian stream; to thee with bared breast will I as a maenad smite my arms with the sacrificial knife. Let my blood flow upon the altars; accustom thyself, my hand, to draw the sword and endure the sight of beloved blood. [She slashes her arm and lets the blood flow upon the altar.] Self-smitten have I poured forth the sacred stream” (Med. 788).

The self-consciousness of such pronouncements are appropriate to a character who is acting out a script that she is also writing.

With all ethical and moral bonds broken, Seneca’s heroes have no binding conditions on them and so excess becomes a virtue. The overtopping of all crimes that came before testifies to the stoic’s newfound power. Atreus articulates this precept when he considers how best to get vengeance on his brother, saying, “Crimes thou dost not avenge, save as thou dost surpass them” (Thy. 199). The nurse recognizes this outlook growing in Medea when she frets, “No simple or half-way crime doth she ponder in her heart; she will outdo herself… Something great is impending, wild, monstrous, impious” (382–83). Indeed, like Thyestes, Medea actively seeks revenge on Jason in the most grotesque and destructive way she can imagine: “Thus does he love his sons? ‘Tis well! I have him! The place to wound him is laid bare” (Med. 549–50). The stoic avenger is thus liberated, not just from crimes yet to be committed but from atrocities of the past which are relegated to simply more theatre. In contrast to her earlier misgivings about the sins she committed to win Jason’s love, the stoic Medea embraces her past:

Glad am I, glad, that I tore off my brother’s head, glad that I carved his limbs, that I robbed my father of his guarded treasure, glad that I armed daughters for an old man’s death. Seek thou fresh fields, my grief; no untrained hand wilt thou bring to any crime. (Med. 911–12)

Her abandonment of grief along with culpability in wrongdoing illustrates the attraction of this kind of stoicism. The blanket exemption from guilt is possible because the stoic borrows from the tyrant the ability to make rules and enforce absolutism on the self.

Of course, performers need an audience, and the stoic self, which is also the theatrical self, recognizes that without anyone watching, the deliciousness of revenge would be lost. Killing Jason’s son is, therefore, an insufficient demonstration of contempt for the vicissitudes of the illusory outer world. “Now to the task, O soul,” she reminds herself, “not in secrecy must thy great deed by lost; to the people approve thy handiwork” (977). Since great performers need a stage, Medea climbs to her palace roof with her son’s body and her remaining living son where all can see—especially Jason. Only at its moment of greatest theatricality is the stoic self fully realized, and once loosed, it overwhelms all other emotions and considerations—an experience Medea recognizes as she exults on the roof:

Though I repent, yet have I done it! Great joy steals on me ‘gainst my will, and lo, it is increasing. [She catches sight of JASON in the crowd below.] This one thing I lacked, that yon man should behold. Naught have I done as yet; whatever crime I’ve done is lost unless he sees it. (982–85)

The attraction of Seneca’s philosophy is the joy that steals over Medea as she kills Jason’s second son and throws the lifeless body down to him: exoneration from all sins past and to come, and a reordering of the world such that it again makes sense, if only to the individual. Elevating the interior and making it the world is to become god of that world, of course, and Medea acknowledges this too: “This day shall do, shall do that whereof no day shall e’er be dumb. I will storm the gods, and shake the universe” (415). Seneca makes clear such an outcome to his
philosophy by allowing Medea to escape on her dragon-pulled chariot, while Jason can only lament the passing of the gods he knew over the bodies of his dead sons.

IV. The Paradox of the Stoic Self

Of course the Elizabethans and the Jacobean received Seneca not from the first century, but mediated by medievalism. James Ker observes that Christians had obvious difficulty knowing what to do with a Seneca who advocated suicide without the certain knowledge of an afterlife.\(^2\) His philosophy was further confused by the correspondence between Paul and Seneca that was not recognized as forgery until the fifteenth century and which continued to be propagated throughout the Middle Ages. Paraphrasing the correspondence, Jerome records that Seneca wished to occupy a position among his own pagan people similar to that of Paul among the Christians. The letters go on to suggest a mentoring relationship in which Seneca helps Paul with his Latin, and through Seneca, the Pauline doctrine enters Nero’s court. Jerome’s conclusion is that Seneca died before he could convert Nero to Christianity or prevent the death of Paul. Ker suggests that this conflation of martyrs with Seneca went some way toward a Christian amelioration of the pagan deathwish inherent in Senecan stoicism. By the sixth century, Seneca’s stoicism has become an exemplar of both the good and the bad in pagan thought.

In *Consolatio philosophia*, Boethius has Philosophy note that that Seneca is not the first person to be persecuted for her sake, but in the third book, Seneca appears as a cautionary tale about the vanity of seeking earthly goods and the favor of kings, whereby Seneca tried unsuccessfully to give his wealth to Nero but was forced into suicide anyway. Much of the

medieval reception of stoicism consists of attempts to co-opt Seneca’s philosophy by depicting him as a secret Christian, persecuted for his beliefs, and propagating the stoic admonition to reject early vanities and submit everything to the will of god, by which Seneca meant the rule of nature. This was distorted by medieval writers to imply that he meant submission to God’s will. However, for the most part, the medieval mind fixated on stoicism as a system for living a godly life, free from the earthly distraction.

To be sure, Senecan heroes often fall short of their stoic philosophy. The corrupted world of the post-Republic is a context in which the stoic has opportunity to demonstrate internal virtues, but there are no guarantees. Littlewood observes that Oedipus fails, for example, because he becomes lost in the world of goods bestowed by Fortune rather than finding consolation in the inner world. That inner world is attractive to the stoic because there the self has the freedom to invent its own laws as a bulwark against the terrestrial laws of the tyrant with whom the stoic hero struggles. However, the self is continually at risk of dissolution in the face of passion—passion which in Neronian literature does not provide a structural framework within which meaningful action can take place in the Homeric sense. Instead, passion-driven action provides only more theater in the mode of Thyestes being fed his children or Hippolytus being torn to pieces by a sea monster in Phaedra. Nothing is actualized by these events other than that they occur, but such outcomes, like Jason’s empty declamation at the end of Medea that there are no gods, are entirely the point. As Seneca says, “It is with life as it is with a play: it matters not how long the act is spun out, but how good the acting is. It makes no difference at what point you stop” (Epistles 77.20).

Paradoxes and distortions of reality by power structures, like that invoked by Caesar for his legions at Pharsalus, are intolerable for the stoic, according to Littlewood, who responds by
drawing from the self-sufficiency of the interior declamations of identity, negations of the self, and a reveling in death, all of which demonstrate contempt for the chaotic exterior and arbitrary rule of the tyrant. The more theatrically this can be achieved, the more forceful the show of rejection. This is the process in Senecan tragedy and on the Jacobean stage through which self-fashioning can occur, not by rhetoric and not through authentic emotion but through the spectacle of grand guignol. This intense isolation of the stoic acting out in extremis, as Littlewood puts it, comes at a cost: the stoic self becomes a social ruin, but this is a cost he is willing to pay and is the reason why Senecan characters like Vindice typically do not agonize about their actions in Hamlet’s fashion.

As the Homeric and Ciceronian models of heroism are effaced by the Senecan, English audiences are presented with a theater less concerned with the fall of heroes and more with the punishment of villains.23 Such a development is inevitable, according to Littlewood, who says, “the moral context of Greek epic and tragedy is sufficiently flexible to concede a certain fatal greatness to its heroes in a way that the Roman-Stoic context is not. As Seneca’s heroes strive to surpass what is conventional, natural, and familiar they trespass against the pattern of moral rightness in the world.”24 His philosophy, after all, is born of the age when the emperor Nero, believing a senate-authorized mob is on the way to beat him to death, famously paces the villa of the freedman, Phaon, muttering, “qualis artifex pereo (what an artist dies in me)” (Suetonius, The Twelve Caesars XLIX).25 Rather than face the horrors of the world with heroism, the characters of Webster and Middleton respond with pastiche, irony and intense self-parody.

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Seneca, of course was not a discovery of the seventeenth century; his commonplaces were well known to the schoolboys of Shakespeare’s day, but the Elizabethan mind had difficulty accommodating the relentless cynicism and theatrical excess of his dramatic works, and so the devolution of revengers into spectacle and sadism was not the first response of Early Modern writers. The first translators of the Senecan corpus were aware of the problem fifty years before the Jacobean found in Seneca a mirror of their own cultural moment in history. In 1559 Jasper Heywood translated *Troas* (*Troades*) and in 1560, *Thyestes*, immediately followed by John Studley’s *Agamemnon* in 1566. The end of Seneca’s version of *Thyestes* is famously unforgiving in the treatment of Thyestes by his brother, Atreus, and equally ambiguous is Seneca’s promise of any divine retribution for the horrors of Atreus.

Having unknowingly eaten his sons in punishment for the earlier seduction of Atreus’s wife, Aerope, in Heywood’s translation, Thyestes asks, “Lie they in fields, a food out flung for feeding fowls to waste? / Or are they kept a prey for wild and brutish beasts to eat?” Not content with the retort, “Thou hast devoured thy sons, and filled thyself with wicked meat” (*Thy* 5.3.67-71), Thyestes feels compelled to lay bare the grotesque details:

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Myself with sword the wounds them gave;
I strake them down. The sacred fires with slaughter vowed I
have
Well pleased; the carcass cutting then and liveless limbs on
ground
I have in little parcels chopped, and some of them I drowned
In boiling cauldrons; some to fires that burnt full slow I put,
And made to drop. Their sinews all and limbs atwo I cut
Even yet alive, and on the spit that thrust was through the same,
I heard the liver wail and cry, and with my hand the flame I oft kept in. (*Thy*. 89-97)
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27 Ibid.
In the original version of the play, Thyestes calls on the gods to avenge him for this act, but Seneca gives the last line to Atreus, who merely tells Thyestes that he can literally go to Hell where his sons can do the punishing. Such an ending may play in Seneca’s Neronian Rome, but in Tudor England, Heywood feels compelled to soften the ending by inventing a fourth scene in which Thyestes gets a soliloquy. In it the bereaved father looks forward to the prologue of *Agamemnon*, in which his own ghost predicts the death of Atreus’s son at the hands of his daughter-in-law, Clytemnestra. In this way Heywood is able to make the brutal acts by Atreus’s part of a cycle of Tantalid revenge and punishment rather than a morally empty dead-end—what Ker and Winston refer to as a “narratorial” tendency in Seneca’s Elizabethan translators.  

V. Middleton and The Narratorial Self

Almost sixty years after Heywood adapted *Thyestes* to suit the palate of a mid-sixteenth century audience, Thomas Middleton’s audience had in a sense “caught up” with Seneca. No longer did the playwright need to narratorialize the texts, to paraphrase Ker and Winston; now the narrative tendency became integrated with the text itself, resulting characters who self-consciously adapt the script they have been provided to suit their own ends, as Vindice does in *The Revenger’s Tragedy*. “When the bad bleeds, then is the tragedy good,” claims Vindice (3.5.199). However, “the spectacle of the bad bleeding is good, is morally satisfying, not in tragedy at all but in comic melodrama” (Mercer 108–09). Indeed, there is more of the absurd than the tragic about the stabbing frenzy choreographed into the dance steps of “The Masque of the Revengers” in the last act of Middleton’s play. It is tempting to view this kind of play as a commentary that reality is essentially comic in nature, but while there is undoubtedly an element

28 Ibid., 44.
of that in play, the outcomes are more a feature of the magnification effect generated by the Senecan artifice.

In a world of chaos where there is no reliable moral authority, the stoic response is to emphasize the artificiality of the exterior and in so doing, impose a structure where there otherwise would be none. This is the Senecan model in which Medea is aware of herself as a mythic role to be filled. As Littlewood puts it, “in some strange sense Medea herself knows that Medea will win her vengeance because that is how the story is written” (8–9). Within this scripted world, the characters become literary constructs and agency is no more than the acting out of the role that fits the dramaturgy as well as possible. Since the performing of revenge in a stage tragedy comes with a set of rules, both Vindice and Hippolito are content to keep practicing them until they get them right. When Vindice comments on the quality of his accomplice’s performance, “You flow well brother,” Hippolito becomes both his own audience: “Puh, I’m shallow yet / Too sparing and too modest” (2.2.144–46). Hippolito’s recognition that his rhetoric has not reached the requisite apocalyptic levels expected in a revenge tragedy counterpoints Hamlet’s self-loathing response to achieving just such language, manifesting as contempt for himself that he must, like a whore, unpack his heart with words (Ham. 2.2.548). In this sense Hippolito and Vindice are not only the audience for their own theatrics, they are also the editors and primary storytellers. Thus, while Hamlet tries to escape the bonds of rhetorical and performance in his search for authentic action, Middleton’s revengers embrace performance as an outcome of script—one that they write and revise while performing. Seen this way, *The Revenger’s Tragedy* consists of a series of improvisations, each one picking up the narrative thread of the previous one that the brothers like best.
Vindice’s theatricalizing of his life on the stage according to a script that he is making up as he goes is a logical outcome of Stoic rejection that the external world manifests as authenticity and its belief that values are determined by arbitrary power networks. However, the fact that Vindice is able to narratize his own theatrical existence within the limits of the play does not mean that the script cannot catch him unawares on a moment-to-moment basis. For all that he glories in switching identities to the pander, Pieto, and revels in the irony of being hired by Lussurioso to track down and kill his own alter ego, Vindice is somewhat surprised to find at the end of act five that his role is just to be the villain of the play after all. Still, he is able to face death with stoic satisfaction:

And now, my lord, since we are in forever,
This work was ours which else might have been slipp'd,
And if we list, we could have nobles clipp'd
And go for less than beggars, but we hate
To bleed so cowardly; we have enough. I'faith,
We're well: our mother turn'd, our sister true,
We die after a nest of dukes. Adieu. (RT 5.3.123–29)

The blurring of the distinction between virtue and vice that Vindice represents is an inevitable outcome of stoic theatricality and is perhaps its greatest weakness as well as its greatest strength. Vindice’s claim to stoicism, Mercer points out, is actually as disputable as Phaedra’s or Medea’s. The three of them certainly talk like stoics, but in the end the tension between stoic rhetoric and stoic action is not what is important in the plays of Seneca or of the Jacobean. The Senecan worldview presents its actors only with stoic opportunity not guarantees.

In common with other Senecan heroes, Vindice is able to define his identity through a narrative framework which he himself creates because what he is narrating is actually a version of his coherent interior world brought onto the stage. Since the inner life, that which passeth show, has a reality greater than the caprice of the exterior, its revealing overwhelms the stage
world. It is to this Hamlet alludes in his rogue and peasant slave speech. A drowning of the stage with tears and a cleaving of the general ear with horrid speech would be the necessary result if the prince allowed his stoically concealed interior to clash with the illusory theatrical reality of the exterior world. The irruption of this magnified inner world into the physical universe creates a conflict that is beyond the moral framework of the physical world to contain in Senecan plays. A consequence of this breakdown is that, absent enforced rules of right and wrong, tragic outcomes cease to be possible. Seneca’s Greek heroes enact horrors without penalty in a way that is unthinkable in Homer’s world. Andromache acknowledges as much when Ulysses has the Greeks demolish the tomb of Hector, in which Andromache has hidden her child, Astyanax:

Such sacrilege, truly, the Greeks had left undared. Temples you have profaned, even of your favouring gods; but our tombs your mad rage had spared. I will resist, will oppose my unarmed hands against you, armed; passion will give strength” (Troades 668).

This is not Iliadic Greece, however, and Andromache’s threats prove to be empty. The gods do not answer and she is forced to give up Astyanax to death, and Ulysses pays no penalty for disrespecting the dead.

In such a universe, without the burden of staying on the narrow path between revenge and morality which Elizabethan heroes have to tread, revenging becomes a much less tasking endeavor. Instead of the spiritual exhaustion experienced by earlier revengers, Vindice is energized and exhilarated by killing: “As fast as they peep up let's cut 'em down” (RT 3.5.234). One consequence of this change is that audience Katharsis tends toward titillation. Mercer sees this as the trajectory of Vindice:

He is an agent of retribution only. There can be no tragedy in his fate because nothing of any moral significance is happening to him. He suffers no fall from greatness; he cannot lose a humanity he never had. In the place of the wild
distraction of Hieronimo and Antonio there is only unbounded enthusiasm. Vindice's savage triumph leaves him not drained or sated but eager for more…

It is, indeed, often difficult to argue for a clear division between the revenger and the villain in Middleton’s play. When Hamlet takes on the apocalyptic rhetoric of revenge, it is always tinged with the weight of obligation. Hamlet may speak words backed by divine anger, but the audience never gets the sense that he is enjoying revenge. Instead of losing himself in fits of moralizing angst, as the prince of Denmark does, Vindice loses himself in a kind of perverse joy when he invents his plan to introduce a “lady” fit for the Duke’s kiss: “Oh at that word / I’m lost again, you cannot find me yet, / I’m in a throng of happy apprehensions!” (RT 3.5.28–30).

VI. The Declamatory Self in *The Duchess of Malfi*

By adopting both Seneca’s view that fate and reality are constructions and his correspondingly artificial style, Webster and Middleton force their characters to confront the same morally difficult questions that Senecan characters do, for example how the self should act in a chaotic universe. Life in a world which lacks an authentic voice of moral authority is life in a vacuum. After witnessing the murder of his children by Medea and her unpunished flight to safety, Jason exclaims, “bear witness where you ride that there are no gods” (*Medea* 1027). The revenger is obliged to ask how that vacuum can be filled, and Seneca’s answer is to fill it with the self. Invariably, his characters do so by appropriating the elevated language of gods. “Peer of the stars I move, and, towering over all, touch with proud head the lofty heavens. Now the glory of the realm I hold, now my father’s throne,” asserts Atreus. “I release the gods” (*Thyestes* 885–888).

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29 Mercer, 109.
Similarly, Medea’s famous declamation of self is more than just an assertion of defiance, rather it is the stoic claim to an ordered interior which has its own cosmology and moral authority: “Medea remains: here you see sea and land, steel and fire and gods and thunderbolts” (Medea 166–67). Escape to the consolation of the stoic interior in this way lends Senecan tragedy its famously declamatory style, by which characters tend to speak at each other rather than to each other, a feature that until recently has been seen as a weakness in the performability of the corpus. The declamation, however, is the stoic’s only means of authentic expression and takes the form of a report from the hidden interior that it exists. It is tailored to be understood in the theatrical world of the exterior and so takes the form of dramatic monologue which invites no debate and accepts no reply.

A central concern in Webster’s play is this tension between the essential self, which the stoic keeps protected in the coherent interior, and the inauthentic exterior which is frequently forced onto individuals by tyrannous power structures. Bosola is aware that his identity is generated in just this way: “It seems you would create me / One of your familiars,” he tells Ferdinand, “a very quaint invisible devil in flesh: / An intelligencer” (1.2.185–89). Existing at the bottom of the social ladder as he does, Bosola perceives himself to be in a world where everything is tainted by corruption, even advancement. Having been made provisor of horse for the Duchess, he says, “What ’s my place? / The provisorship o’ th’ horse? Say, then, my corruption / Grew out of horse-dung: I am your creature” (1.2.212–14). For his part, Ferdinand, as much of an anti-stoic as Bosola, does not accept that a hidden interior which is more authentic than that seen by men can exist, in part because he himself is unable to conceal his own nature from the eyes of others. “Hypocrisy,” he claims, “is woven of a fine small thread, / Subtler than
Webster creates a stage environment as corrupt as the court of Denmark, but marked by the Jacobean doubt about its own lateness in history, to borrow Ker’s description of the Julio-Claudian age, heroic remediation is impossible, signified by Bosola’s inept attempt to save Antonio’s life. Hamlet’s Humanistic monologue in act two is intensely theatrical in both construction and delivery, but it describes a world full of noble creatures that the prince recognizes to be no less real for his own current inability to see them. In a stark parody of both Hamlet’s “What a piece of work is a man,” monologue and his musings on beasts and men in the fourth act soliloquy, Bosola describes the citizens of the world of Malfi in radically different terms:

What thing is in this outward form of man
To be belov’d? We account it ominous,
If nature do produce a colt, or lamb,
A fawn, or goat, in any limb resembling
A man; and fly from ’t as a prodigy.
Man stands amaz’d to see his deformity
In any other creature but himself:
But in our own flesh though we bear diseases
Which have their true names only ta’en from beasts,
As the most ulcerous wolf and swinish measles;
Though we are eaten up of lice and worms,
And though continually we bear about us
A rotten and dead body, we delight
To hide it in rich tissue: all our fear,
Nay, all our terror, is, lest our physician
Should put us in the ground to be made sweet. (2.1.53–67)

His scathing account of the nature of man as a creature whose greatest terror is to be put in the ground, despite the grotesquerie of its life, seems devoid of any redeeming features, but Bosola’s mockery of the paragon of animals begins by noting that it is the outward form of man that suffers the indignities of beasts and is repelled by its own image in animal deformity. His view of
the nobility is no less flattering than of the base and points to one of the flaws in the narratorial self that Vindice favors, as he tells Ferdinand, “you / Are your own chronicle too much, and grossly / Flatter yourself.”

If Bosola feels that the same criticisms he levels at the outer man are equally true for the inner man, assuming that he believes such a thing as an authentic interior exists in the first place, he does not say directly, but his anecdote of the French woman seems to imply that beneath the surface there is only more of the same:

Why, from your scurvy face-physic: to behold
thee not painted inclines somewhat near a miracle.
These in thy face here, were deep ruts and foul
sloughs the last progress. There was a lady in France
that, having had the small-pox, flayed the skin off her
face to make it more level; and whereas before she
looked like a nutmeg-grater, after she resembled an
abortive hedgehog. (2.1.28–35)

As is typical of the theatrical malcontent, he includes himself in his unflattering view of people, observing that “A politician is the devil's quilted anvil: / He fashions all sins on him, and the blows / Are never heard” (3.2.323-25). Further, since even achievement is corrupt in a corrupt world, removing the possibility of redemption through good work and the acquisition of honors:

O, this base quality
Of intelligence! Why, every quality i' th’ world
Prefers but gain or commendation:
Now, for this act I am certain to be rais’d,
And men that paint weeds to the life are prais'd. (3.2.327–31)

The depths of Bosola’s distain for man is not understood by Ferdinand, who dismisses his intelligencer’s attitude as simply melancholy born of envy and a lack of ambition to improve himself. This inability of Ferdinand to see into the true nature of the people around him creates a context in which the declamatory assertions of the Duchess come as all the more of a shock his worldview.
Stripped of a moral and ethical framework, the world of *Malfi* operates according to the same rules as the Senecan stage, which is to say that it revels in sadism and spectacle.

Ferdinand’s cure for his sister’s “sickness” requires the application of “desperate physic: / We must not now use balsamum but fire, / The smarting cupping-glass—for that's the mean / To purge infected blood, such blood as hers” (2.5.23–26). Likewise, expected empathic responses are as artificially constructed and deconstructed as the stage itself. At the thought of the torture soon to be endured by the Duchess, Ferdinand is reminded of his humanity by a tear, but only momentarily: “There is a kind of pity in mine eye, / I 'll give it to my handkercher; and now 'tis here, / I 'll bequeath this to her bastard” (2.5.27–29) Yet, despite his characterization of the Duchess’s marriage as an illness, it is he who urges his brother to distract him before her laughing brings to mind paranoid, incestuous fantasies of “some strong-thigh'd bargeman” or other lusty tradesman having sex with her. Even the cardinal says, “You fly beyond your reason,” and counters his brother’s excess;

_I can be angry_  
Without this rupture. There is not in nature  
A thing that makes man so deform'd, so beastly,  
As doth intemperate anger: chide yourself.  
You have divers men who never yet express'd  
Their strong desire of rest but by unrest,  
By vexing of themselves. Come, put yourself  
In tune. (2.5.47, 56–62)

Indeed, the paroxysms of anger that turn Ferdinand into a wolf by the play’s end brings to mind Hamlet’s admonition that rage turns Pyrrhus into the Hyrcanian beast, but notably, Pyrrhus exists in a heroic age, and his bestial nature is warranted within his context.

The parallels between Hamlet and Ferdinand are revealing not only for the different cultural frameworks in which they exist but also in the way *Malfi* frequently inverts the values of Shakespearean’s play. When the prince indulges in some Gothic rhetoric before he goes to his
mother’s bedchamber, the audience has already been prepared for Hamlet’s love of the theatrical
by his *Aeneid* performance to the player king and his advice to the acting troupe:

'Tis now the very witching time of night,
When churchyards yawn and hell itself breathes out
Contagion to this world. Now could I drink hot blood,
And do such bitter business as the bitter day
Would quake to look on. (*Ham. 3.2.79–83*)

In the prince’s case, this is literally play acting, and it has no more substance than his self-
exhortation to bloody thoughts, beyond a reminder to himself that words, words, words are not the way to revenge. Conversely, Ferdinand’s similarly theatrical meditation on cruelty constitutes a plan of action:

    I would have their bodies
    Burnt in a coal-pit with the vantage stopp'd,
    That their curs'd smoke might not ascend to heaven;
    Or dip the sheets they lie in, in pitch or sulphur,
    Wrap them in 't, and then light them like a match;
    Or else to-boil their bastard to a cullis,
    And give 't his lecherous father to renew
    The sin of his back. (3.1.67–74)

This is not to say that Ferdinand’s inner desires to see havoc wreaked on the body of his sister is any less theatrical than Hamlet’s “bitter business,” but on the Senecan stage of Webster, the division between theatrics and reality become blurred, and at some points the two converge completely, as they do during the masque of the madmen.

Lacking a moral aesthetic in which to embed itself—Cicero’s mythohistorical ideal Republic, for example - the path of the isolationist stoic is fraught with confusion. The act of sending madmen to the Duchess’s chamber is sadistic, but it is primarily intended to be an act of didacticism on the part of Ferdinand, one of a series of theatrical signs he provides his sister on the nature of the world. The Duchess acknowledges it as such to Cariola: “Indeed, I thank him. / Nothing but noise and folly / Can keep me in my right wits; whereas reason / And silence make
me stark mad” (Malfi 4.2.5–7). This is the positioning of Medea, torn between her role as mother to protect her children and the jilted wife who needs to punish Jason. The paradox forced by the outer world is embraced by the stoic interior, where it can be negated, but at great cost. Typically, in Senecan tragedy, the cost is a struggle to maintain sanity. The Duchess expresses aloud this inner conflict, as much to confirm for herself as to clarify for Cariola:

I'll tell thee a miracle:
   I am not mad yet, to my cause of sorrow.
   Th' heaven o'er my head seems made of molten brass,
   The earth of flaming sulphur, yet I am not mad. (Malfi 4.2.24–27)

After the parade of madmen finishes with its lesson on what the world really is, Bososla, in the guise of an old man, signifying death, adds a postscript to break the Duchess down further: “What's this flesh? a little cruded milk, fantastical puff-paste. Our bodies are weaker than those paper-prisons boys use to keep flies in; more contemptible, since ours is to preserve earth-worms” (4.2.130–33). It is Bosola who is given the lesson, however. He claims that “this world is like [the soul’s] little turf of grass, and the heaven o'er our heads like her looking-glass, only gives us a miserable knowledge of the small compass of our prison.” The Duchess’s famous solution, “I am Duchess of Malfi still,” a stoic world within itself, is lost on her tormentor, because like his master, Bosola has given himself completely to the goods of Fortune and remains a slave to tyranny (Malfi 4.2.135–38, 147).

The stoic’s ability to assert control over the inner world manifests itself most commonly by demonstrating contempt for the illusion of worldly Fortune, and the more extreme the context in which contempt can be expressed, the more convincing is the stoic’s self-mastery. Since the stoic is best able to do this in extremis, the plays delight in tragic spectacle that evokes revulsion, glee, sadistic satisfaction or a combination of all three. The focus is not so much on the tragedy of death itself because that involves the moment when play acting ceases and the self becomes
immanent. Rather, it is the pain and terror in what Littlewood calls “the spectator-victim” witnessing events that delights. When the Duchess kisses the corpse’s hand, her revulsion, “Ha! lights! - O, horrible!”, is not sufficient for Ferdinand. He must get to play both the impresario and the stage magician rolled into one. His call, “Let her have lights enough,” demonstrates how far removed Webster’s world is from Hamlet’s even though the plays are composed only nine years apart (4.1.53). In Elsinore, Claudius’s demand, “give me some light,” is a plea for relief from the darkness of his own acts played out on the Mousetrap stage, but in the Senecan world of Malfi, light reveals the exterior world’s horrors rather than chases them back to the shadows. Once the suffering that is possible in an environment absent of moral authority stands revealed in this cold light, even the antagonist cannot but be alarmed at the tableau presented. At the sight of his murdered sister, Ferdinand tells Bosola, “Cover her face: mine eyes dazzle: she died young” (Malfi 4.2.267).

Ferdinand’s comment is a recognition that, in the corrupt world outside the self, no one is insulated from the damaging effects of spectacle, not least the citizens of Jacobean England, who under James’ rule find themselves demoted from participants in the monarch’s glory to mere spectators to it. The reflexive damage done to an audience witnessing horrors was known to the ancients, and Seneca commented on the phenomena both in his dramatic and philosophical works. Littlewood offers Phoenissae as an example:

*Phoenissae* offers a normative perspective on criminal horror: as Oedipus waits in a cave on Mt Cithaeron to see his sons’ civil war the very landscape is described as a spectator weeping and crying out. The hollowed-out cave is an image of his broken eyes and tragic spectatorship here is consistently represented as a damaging experience. It is an experience which Seneca’s vengeful protagonists inflict on their victims. Medea and Atreus expect and depend on this normal human reaction: when their victims, Jason and Thyestes, unwittingly expose their frailties they fabricate a suitable revenge whose fruition is coextensive with the unfolding of the tragedy.30

30 Littlewood, 11.
Littlewood’s characterization of the tragic spectator experience being a toxic exposure is borne out by Ferdinand’s decent into madness through Malfi’s fifth act. Only at the end is he able to articulate a vision of existence in the world of illusions: “My sister, O! My sister! there’s the cause on ’t. / Whether we fall by ambition, blood, or lust, / Like diamonds, we are cut with our own dust” (Malfi 5.5.71–73). The only response to this trap is the Stoic one articulated by the Duchess when she sees the “lifeless bodies” of her husband and children, presented in a grotesque parody of the family unit: “That’s the greatest torture souls feel in hell— / In hell, that they must live, and cannot die” (4.1.70–71.). This is the paradox of Senecan stoic solution - that terrestrial existence is actually a death and the leaving of it can be considered a liberating assertion of selfhood.

If the theatrical excess of Webster owes much to Seneca, it also accesses such devices through the satirical revenge tragedies of Middleton, but where Middleton and Webster differ is in the use of the Senecan declamation. The Duchess tends to speak in declamations throughout, but she does not initially use them as a declaration of identity in the face of arbitrary and capricious tyrants in the manner of Senecan heroes like Medea. This is partly a feature of the in media res device favored by Classical texts: Medea and the Trojan women are already damaged by fate when their plays begin. Webster’s Duchess, by contrast, initially presents with the healthy concerns of a whole person. Flushed with the promise of a new life as Antonio’s wife, she has time to muse about her vanity: “Doth not the colour of my hair ’gin to change? / When I wax gray, I shall have all the court / Powder their hair with arras, to be like me” (3.2.59–60). Her declamations speak to an interior which she keeps hidden more out of concern for custom than as a safe retreat from cruelty:

   Now she pays it.
The misery of us that are born great—
We are forc'd to woo, because none dare woo us.
And as a tyrant doubles with his words
And fearfully equivocates, so we
Are forc'd to express our violent passions
In riddles and in dreams, and leave the path
Of simple virtue, which was never made
To seem the thing it is not. Go, go brag
You have left me heartless—mine is in your bosom,
I hope 'twill multiply love there. (1.2.362–72)

Even in this, however, her words acknowledge a tyranny that is never far away in Malfi, and she is able to quickly put her declamatory style to service her stoic embrace of death.

Seneca’s philosophy advocating willing acceptance of death, indeed, the seeking out of death as the final rejection of the tyrant makes the leaving of this world a form of freedom for the stoic but equally, it is an aggressive show of defiance to the tyrant. Her assertion, “For know, whether I am doom'd to live or die, / I can do both like a prince” (3.2.70–71) is an intolerable concept to the anti-stoic Ferdinand, who leaping out from his concealment calls her bluff: “Die, then, quickly! [Giving her a poniard.] / Virtue, where art thou hid? What hideous thing / Is it that doth eclipse thee?” (3.2.71–73). Again he apes Hamlet’s language by parodying the prince’s “shame, where is thy blush?”, but while the intertextuality of the language suggests a parallel between the remarriage of the Duchess and the remarriage of Gertrude, the theatrics of the prince in his mother’s closet are predicated on a real crime against the king, where the Duchess has in fact committed none. Lacking the authentic rage over the regicide and fratricide that underpins Hamlet’s theatrical outburst in the closet, Ferdinand’s question becomes an empty signifier – theatrics for their own sake. This, however, is indicative of the slippery world of the Jacobean where royal pageants are simulacra, taking their cue from “authentic” shows of popular love during Elizabethan pageants that were actually stage managed in the first place.
The Duchess’ stoic response confounds Bosola’s earlier view of humanity as hopelessly corrupt and venal and begins his recuperation by its example.

BOSOLA. All comfort to your grace!
DUCHESS. I will have none.
’Pray-thee, why dost thou wrap thy poison’d pills
In gold and sugar? (4.1.19–20)

Still unable to grasp the fact that the Duchess does not fear death but rather embraces it as an escape from the inauthentic theatrical world of the exterior, Bosola pleads with her not to give in to despair because she is a Christian, but she points out, “The church enjoins fasting: / I'll starve myself to death” (4.1.75–76). The black humor in her response is lost on him as is the source of her clam acceptance of her impeding torture and murder. In the face of his platitudes, she is forced to make plain to him the true vision of the Seneca stoic:

Good comfortable fellow,
Persuade a wretch that's broke upon the wheel
To have all his bones new set: entreat him live,
To be executed again. Who must despatch me?
I account this world a tedious theatre,
For I do play a part in't 'gainst my will. (4.1.79–84)

The metaphor of the world as theater was of course known in the sixteenth century, but the Duchess’s specific use of it to indicate life as a place of tedium that she would willingly escape from adds a valence common to early Jacobean texts. It calls to mind Macbeth’s “Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow” monologue which depicts an existence worn out and pointless rather than the overwhelming world which engenders Hamlet’s wish for discorporation. This is an accounting of life in the material world as trivial—“Indeed, I have not leisure to tend so small a business,” says the Duchess in response to Bosola’s offer to save her life.

Let heaven a little while cease crowning
martyrs,
To punish them!
Go, howl them this; and say, I long to bleed:
It is some mercy when men kill with speed. (4.1.106–08)

_The Duchess of Malfi_, of course, draws on the Medeas of both Euripides and Seneca as intertexts, through association with the Classical hero’s statements, _Medea nunc sum_ (Medea now I am) and _Mede superest_ (Medea remains), conflated into “I am Duchess of Malfi still.” Nandini Pandi details how Medea makes the assertion at approximately the same place in the fourth act of Seneca’s play.

Echoes of Dido and Medea… underscore [the Duchess’s] radical independence and threat to modern social order, particularly given the disastrous consequences of such women’s behavior even within an ancient context. The Duchess’s imitation of classical heroines spells her downfall within her own stage-world, too. Yet Webster’s authorial engagement with these ancient exempla allows him to diffuse some of their association with danger and chaos. His reintegration of these pagan female literary models within a Christian spiritual framework ultimately allows the Duchess to become the author of her own example, highlighting her ethical intelligence and spiritual fortitude upon her death in Act 4.\(^\text{31}\)

Where Medea struggles with maternal guilt and spousal rejection - the fracturing of self that Pandi discusses—the Duchess experiences no such splitting; she is completely self-possessed and responds to Bosola’s observation that “The manner of your death should much afflict you” with the cryptic observation that

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\begin{align*}
&\text{I know death hath ten thousand several doors} \\
&\text{For men to take their exits: and 'tis found} \\
&\text{They go on such strange geometrical hinges,} \\
&\text{You may open them both ways—any way, for} \\
&\text{heaven-sake,} \\
&\text{So I were out of your whispering. Tell my brothers} \\
&\text{That I perceive death, now I am well awake,} \\
&\text{Best gift is they can give, or I can take.} \\
&\text{I would fain put off my last woman's-fault,} \\
&\text{I 'd not be tedious to you.} \quad \text{(4.2.223–25)}
\end{align*}
\]

The paradox of death as something that can be given or taken and that wakefulness comes in the proximity of death reifies the Senecan proposition that the material the world is a dream state. The effect of it is not lost on Bosola who later reiterates the words of the Duchess: “I stand like one / That long hath ta'en a sweet and golden dream: / I am angry with myself, now that I wake” (4.2.325–27). This has been the difference between Bosola and the Duchess, not that he lacks a coherent interior and she does not but that he has been blind or asleep to its existence.

His response, to try to make amends and gain perhaps some redemption, is doomed to fail from the outset because he has still not learned from the example of the Duchess that their world does not allow for mythic tropes to operate. The true stoic response is simply the leavening of it. In this he is perhaps to be excused because he has not the Duchess’s facility. Early in the play he characterizes himself as a man of small ambition, one who would “look no higher than / I can reach: they are the gods that must ride on wing’d horses; / A lawyer's mule of a slow pace will both suit my disposition and business” (2.1.97–100) More tellingly, he exists in the same world of Medea which Jason curses as being one without gods or at least one which features only the cruel gods of King Lear, another Jacobean play in which attempts at heroic action lead to further ambiguity rather than resolution. Bosola’s lament after his botched attempt to save Antonio, “We are merely the stars' tennis-balls, struck and banded / Which way please them,” echoes in fact Lear’s “As flies to wanton boys are we to th' gods. / They kill us for their sport,” uttered by Gloucester after the Senecan gesture of having his eyes plucked out. (4.1.38–39).

After her death, Bosola finally understands what the Duchess already knew - that the goods of Fortune are subject to the whim of the tyrant and thus have only illusory value. Ironically enough, this lesson is learned through receiving only blame from Ferdinand rather than reward for carrying out the execution of the Duchess, as his master ordered. Bosola’s
determination to change his role illustrates the theatrical self-fashioning that is possible in stoic philosophy. If the inner world is governable and moral, and the outer life is simply a role, it follows that the individual can chose to play a different role. “though I loath'd the evil, yet I lov'd / You that did counsel it;” Bosola tells Ferdinand, “and rather sought / To appear a true servant than an honest man” (4.2.333–35). It is difficult not hear in Bosola’s complaint an echo of Seneca’s unheeded admonition: “Unhappy fellow, you are a slave to men, you are a slave to your business, you are a slave to life. For life, if courage to die be lacking, is slavery (Epistles 77.14).

The difficulty with theatrically changing roles is that the stoic self tends to lack clear definition to begin with, consisting as it does of negations and defiances, according to Ker. Fitch and McElduff point out that a constructed self is also by its very nature a minimal self:

The notional or nominal self is a simplification of the complexities of existence to something that can encapsulated in a word or a description. To put it more generally, self-construction is always a reduction because it ignores the fluid self which exists in relationships in favour of the self-as-entity.32

For these reasons, Bosola’s newfound self-reliance ultimately is shambolic, evidenced by his botched attempt to save Antonio in which he ends up accidentally killing him instead. Perhaps the final word on the theatrics of The Duchess of Malfi belongs not to the Duchess or Bosola nor even to Seneca but to Ferdinand:

Caesar's fortune was harder than Pompey's; Caesar died in the arms of prosperity, Pompey at the feet of disgrace: you both died in the field. The pain 's nothing: pain many times is taken away with the apprehension of greater, as the tooth-ache with the sight of a barber that comes to pull it out—there's philosophy for you. (5.5.55–62)

Chapter 4

If You Have Writ Your Annals True

I. The Historical Self

Seneca’s staging of his own death, marked by the theatrical gestures of calm dictation to scribes, the sprinkling of libations, and the dispensing of *consolatio* to a small, hand-picked audience of friends and slaves attempts to capture the stoic moment, but it also aspires to diachronic significance. Like all Roman statesmen, Seneca is intensely aware of the *imago* that he must leave behind, given that death is the moment when the fabric of identity can no longer sustain itself through rhetoric, emotion, and *playing*. However, Roman identity is not lost at the moment of death. It simply translates into a system of signs which can plug into the semiology of chronicles, statuary, and *imagines*¹ belonging to statesmen and generals whose accomplishments are the historical tapestry by which Rome understands itself, and in which plebeians as well as patricians can participate. This historical self is not simply a matter of “making a good ending,” in the way that Seneca advises; rather it must be shaped throughout life, and if done well, it is through this sign system that the aristocratic dead are able to remain a potent force in Roman politics and life—one that must be negotiated by the quick if ambitions are to be realized.

This version of self which, post mortem, remains part the community is not an abstract idea for Romans but rather is an active schema during the construction of the state by its

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¹ Masks of ancestors hung in Roman atria and sometimes worn by relatives at patrician funerals. See p. 4 and also Flower (2000).
chroniclers and architects. Clemence Schultze notes how this process of historicizing is integrated into the work of ancient biographers:

> When Dionysius asserts in the preface (1.6.3–5) his aim of benefiting three categories of people (the Romans of the past, their present and future descendants, and himself) he implies that memory is more than a mere process of simple recording and transmission. Rather, as the remembered past operates upon the present by means of written histories, it manifests an active power to cause change. The historian is benefited by doing justice to the memory of those great Romans—male and female, successful and flawed alike—who contributed to the city’s life and growth: to receive such immortal glory is the nearest that these human beings can come to the divine (1.6.3).²

Admission to this pantheon of semi-divine ancestors does not come without a price, however, in that the historical self is antithetical to the stoic self. The patrician expecting his identity to become part of the history of Rome must forego the sanctity and safety of the inner world, revealing instead what is private in an ostentatious public display of personal excellence. Caesar, for example, evinces a keen awareness of the power of the historical self in his practice of dictating multiple letters to several scribes simultaneously, detailing (and sometimes exaggerating) his victories in Gaul for consumption by a Roman citizenry eager for stories of its own greatness.³

The citizens of Early Modern Britain share with the Romans of antiquity this desire to see themselves reflected in the exploits of its own aristocratic adventurers, like Raleigh and Oxford. Conversely, such aristocrats and royals are at the mercy of the demands of audience and the power inherent in the viewer—hence Elizabeth’s royal tours and carnivals in the provinces and Ophelia’s recognition that her prince is “Th' expectancy and rose of the fair state, / The glass of fashion and the mould of form, / Th' observed of all observers” (Ham. 3.1.154–56). This chapter

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offers a reading of the Early Modern engagement with personhood as historical artifact and its relationship to the power of the viewer. Playwrights of the period were highly conscious of the psychological and physical damage that could be done to an individual trapped by the claustrophobia engendered by the expectations of the communal gaze. Shakespeare’s last tragedies, in particular, critique the inherent contradictions in the personal traits valued by the Romans as worthy of historicizing (virtus) and recognize a different dynamic between viewer and viewed. Now the demands of the audience become an essential element in the generation of the virtus embodied by Roman heroes, and self becomes a fluid quantity which exists in the slippage between the valorous and the valorized.

From the beginning of the tragedy genre, Thomas Kyd’s *The Spanish Tragedy* (c.1587) offers insight into the Early Modern understanding of the power dynamic between the viewer and the viewed. The chapter’s main focus, however, is on Shakespeare’s late entry to the tragedy corpus, *Coriolanus* (c.1608), and it argues that the tragedy of Martius (sometimes “Marcius” in *F.*) results from the general’s mistaking Roman values as being essential qualities of the self rather than social constructs. Read this way, the play can be seen to interrogate what happens when the historical self consequently refuses to serve its own imago. *Coriolanus* is especially interesting given its relatively unique position as deriving from one of Plutarch’s *Lives* which itself appears to have come from single source—Dionysius of Halicarnassus’s great work, *Rhômaikē Archaiologia (Roman Antiquities or Roman Histories)*, composed during the reign of Augustus. Thanks to his somewhat unusual compositional approach of relying on a single source for *The Life of Caius Martius Coriolanus*, not only are Plutarch’s decision-making strategies with his material easier to see, but so too are the elements in Plutarch’s account which Shakespeare chooses to emphasize for his own purposes.
II. Rome and the Power of Signs

In the semiotic system to which the Roman noble hopes to consign an identity suitable for historical preservation, perhaps nothing is as evocative as the ancestor masks known as *imagines*, displayed in Roman atria, produced at funerals, and even deployed in trials as evidence of familial authenticity. The ubiquity of *imagines* and their mode of construction as life masks or death masks remains somewhat speculative. In his article, “‘Goodbye Livia’: Dying in the Roman Home,” David Noy says,

> [a]ncestor-masks are described by the Elder Pliny (*HN* 35.2.6) as *expressi cera vultus* ‘faces pressed out in wax’… a form most typical of a cast from a mould taken on the features—in this case of the deceased.’ Aristocratic Romans often commissioned portraits of themselves, and this would be an obvious point at which to create the ancestor-mask too.4

The casting process involved generating a gypsum plaster mold which was then oiled and filled with more plaster to make a positive image, the same process later copied by Renaissance aristocrats.5 *Imagines*’ ability to blur the edges between life and death, the real and the theatrical, and the past and present is clearly demonstrated by Nero who, according to Cassius Dio, would wear theatrical masks resembling himself, “but the women’s masks were all fashioned after the features of Poppaea,6 in order that, though dead, she might still take part in the spectacle.”7 The uncanny nature of such an act may speak to no more than the hubristic delusions of absolute power—in this case the power to reverse death itself. More suggestively, Nero’s forcing of the

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5 Ibid., 9.
6 Poppaea Sabina (30 CE-65 CE), second wife of Nero. Suetonius and Dio record that she died after Nero kicked her in the abdomen while she was pregnant, although as anti-Neronians, their accounts are suspect. According to Pliny and Tacitus, Nero went into a period of intense mourning after her death.
image of an idealized wife (as opposed to the real version he kicked to death in an argument, according to some Roman historians) onto other women implies that Nero perceives identity as a hierarchical system. The identities of women under the masks of Poppea presumably suffer some form of displacement as Nero subsumes them to the more powerful identity of his dead wife signified by her image.

Just as Roman authenticity could be measured by a family’s store of imagines, no greater punishment could be meted out than the destruction of the same and the consequent erasure of a man’s memory. In her 1996 work, Ancestor Masks and Aristocratic Power, Harriet Flower details the case of Gnaeus Calpurnius Piso, who committed suicide after being condemned for treason in the reign of Tiberius for the murder of the hero, Germanicus. The senatus consultum orders a variety of poena in its damnatio memoriae [condemnation of a man’s memory], including the forbidding of women to mourn his death, the destruction of all public and private portraits of Piso, the forbidding of the Calpurnii to display Piso’s imago, either at family funerals or with the other imagines in the atrium. Perhaps worst of all, the senatus consultum requires that his oldest son, Gnaeus, change his name to Lucius, so that not only would Piso’s name no longer be listed among the magistrates, no space would be created that recorded its existence in the first place.\(^8\) Piso’s punishment in sum is the complete erasure of identity. Anti-historicity, it seems, is the greatest penalty the senate can think to inflict on him.

This is the same anxiety Ovid records regarding his fear of dying in exile after Augustus banished him to Tomis (modern Romania) at the edge of the empire in 8 CE. Although the reasons for his exile are not fully understood, Ovid makes clear how he feels about the consequences. Among other things, he would leave no imago as “presumably in Tomi there

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\(^8\) Flower 24.
would be no-one who knew how to [create one], and no-one who wanted to keep a death-mask of Ovid anyway, since he cannot have expected his portrait to be displayed or his memory preserved there.”

Gaertner believes Ovid’s exile to possibly have been an aesthetic pose or misrepresentation in the face of declining artistic output. If this is true, Ovid’s imagined loss of historical presence becomes all the more significant as a marker of the interior mode that Romans valued.

II. The Solitary Self

Generating a self worthy of taking its place among the imagines of illustrious ancestors tasked the Roman nobles with embodying Roman virtus to the greatest extent possible, and no Renaissance play is more intensely engaged with Roman values than Shakespeare’s late tragedy, Coriolanus: “[t]he words ‘Rome’ and ‘Roman’ recur more times in Coriolanus than in any Shakespeare play other than Titus Andronicus—eighty-eight for ‘Rome’, twenty-two for ‘Roman’.” As with all his Roman plays, Shakespeare uses Plutarch as his primary source, and Plutarch in turn relies on the account by Dionysius, although a parallel version of the general’s life also survives in the work of Livy, Philemon Holland’s 1600 translation of which is believed to have been known by Shakespeare. It is worth noting how Dionysus constructs his narrative of Coriolanus’s funeral, given that he is, after all, depicting the end of a Roman traitor.

When everything was ready they laid him, dressed in the clothing of a supreme commander, on a couch adorned in a most splendid manner, and ordered the booty, the spoils and the crowns, together with the memories of the cities he had taken, to be carried before his bier. The young men who were the most Illustrious for their deeds in war took up the bier, and carrying it to the most notable suburb,

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9 Noy 17.
12 Vivian Thomas, Shakespeare’s Roman Worlds (Routledge, 1989) 117.
placed it on the prepared funeral pyre, the whole city going together in procession with the body with lamentations and tears. Then, when they had slaughtered many victims in his honour and offered up all such first-offerings as men fittingly do at the funeral pyres of kings and leaders of armies, those who had been intimate with him remained there till the fire died down, after which they gathered together his remains and buried them in that same place, constructing an imposing memorial by heaping up a lofty mound with many hands helping. (*Rhōmaikē Archaiologia* 8.59.3–4)\(^{13}\)

What is notable about this account is that Dionysius offers a view of a Roman funeral which doubles as the triumph Coriolanus was never given in life. Flower notes that the images of the captured cities represent the triumphal litters which carried portraits or models of the victorious general,\(^{14}\) and by employing the word *mnema*, Dionysius is suggesting that these images will elicit memory of the general’s past achievements, such that “his memory (*mneme*) has not become extinct, but [instead] he is still celebrated and hymned” (*AR* 8.62.3).\(^{15}\) He has died by stoning at the hands of the Volscians during his attempt to explain his change of heart, and therefore, while it would be inappropriate to have either Romans or Volscians deliver a *laudatio*, Coriolanus has impacted Rome in the manner of all its great generals, and thus he deserves to be mourned and remembered, passing into history.\(^{16}\)

For the most part, Plutarch’s *Life of Coriolanus* stays true to the account in Dionysius, but the departures he does make from his source material are picked up and amplified further by Shakespeare—amplifications which taken together suggest a more intense engagement with the issue of autonomous identity than that of either Dionysius or even Plutarch. In essence Plutarch assigns a personality-based motive for Martius’s hatred of the plebeians that does not exist in either the Livian or Dionysian account of historical events. Shakespeare prefers this

\(^{13}\) Trans. Schultze.
\(^{14}\) Flower 113.
\(^{15}\) Trans. Schultze.
\(^{16}\) Schultze 89.
contemptuous Plutarchan Martius over the relatively anonymous patrician of the *Archaiologia*, but then he separates this version from the other patricians even further by the addition of an isolating, arrogant stubbornness. This latter quality Shakespeare emphasizes through further alteration of Dionysius’s historical account.

By 493 BCE, after several near revolts caused by unemployment and debt, the *tribunus plebis* was established as a check to protect the plebeians from the excesses of Rome’s rich and powerful, resulting in “a kind of state within a state, virtually [implying] a bitter class conflict.”

In the account of Dionysius, Martius is simply one of a group of patrician senators who oppose the power of the tribunes and who loathe the common people, but Plutarch changes the focus to Martius’s own nature, itself a construct of his mother Volumnia’s expectations: “the only thing that made him to love honour, was the joye he sawe his mother dyd take of him. For he thought nothing made him so happie and honorable, as that his mother might heare every bodie praise and commend him” (*The Life of Coriolanus* 147; trans. North). Furthermore, it is Martius who speaks for the abolition of the tribunes, resulting in the plebian demand that he stand trial so that the tribunes might “shewe howe he dyd aspire to be King, and would prove that all his actions tended to usurpe tyrannical power over Rome” (*Life of Cor.* 166). Plutarch contrives to have Martius exiled by a vote, and being only one member of a faction of conservative patricians, although the most vocal, he is accompanied by many of them to the city gates.

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Shakespeare follows much of this Plutarchan narrative away from Dionysius, but he intensifies the solitude of the general by having him exiled through tribunate declaration, not by a vote, and Coriolanus subsequently leaves Rome unaccompanied.

CORIOLANUS. Let every feeble rumour shake your hearts!
   Your enemies, with nodding of their plumes,
   Fan you into despair! Have the power still
   To banish your defenders, till at length
   Your ignorance—which finds not till it feels,
   Making not reservation of yourselves,
   Still your own foes—deliver you as most
   Abated captives to some nation
   That won you without blows! Despising,
   For you, the city, thus I turn my back.
   There is a world elsewhere! (3.3.125-35)

Shakespeare’s shaping of Coriolanus to be a more solitary character than that of his Plutarchan model, subject to greater capriciousness by the tribunes, parallels his decision to make Menenius’s popularity with the plebeians a feature of his patrician rhetorical skills. Livy records that his connection with them is, in fact, a consequence of his own plebeian origins. The Shakespearean Menenius is consequently aligned more with Martius in his contempt for the plebeians than is the Menenius of his sources, and the play thus transforms the historical account into a drama of the solitary self set against a background of class conflict.

Through this isolationism, Shakespeare examines a radically new form of the interior, one that finally abandons completely the nostalgia for medievalism which colors Elizabethan plays in the style of Hamlet. Coriolanus represents a new kind of figure whose tragedy is born of his mistaken belief in an interior which can stand apart from the community. Hamlet’s “that within which passeth show” does not exist in the Coriolan universe, but the great general’s refusal to display his scars, because such theatricality is beneath him, indicates that Martius still

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believes its does. “I play / The man I am,” he famously boasts to Volumnia (Cor. 3.2.15–16).

The isolation of Martius is not that of the Senecan stoic, however. For the Plutarchan Coriolanus, the outer world is not a chaotic illusion to be rejected in favor of retreat to the coherent interior but is, instead, an inferior projection of that self on to the blank canvas of the exterior. Coriolanus’s way of thinking, in Shakespeare’s source material, represents an older Classical view in which Roman history is constructed from the personal qualities and achievements of patrician generals like Martius, himself. Where Caesar’s Brutus believes his own identity and that of Rome are mirrors to each other, Coriolanus takes a more Platonic view: he is the perfect form of which Rome is the shadow. Neither is he an Iliadic figure like the prince of Denmark, because the epic framework which could supply him with such a destiny is disabled by the interposition of this self-generating interior.

IV. Questioning Virtus

While this version of the Roman general is the starting point, the trajectory of Coriolanus tracks rapidly away from Plutarch as Shakespeare abandons Classical models and moves to a modern conception of selfhood in which actor and audience are co-authors of identity. The tragedy of Coriolanus is Martius’s refusal to accept that Roman virtus, which he believes inheres in his own identity, is actually the result of a negotiation between the plebeian gaze that he despises and his own valorous deeds performed for the audience to approve. Martius fails to grasp even the fact that valor itself is a community construct rather than a constituent element of being. Shakespeare’s awareness that the gaze of the audience has power over the actor is already apparent six or seven years before the writing of Coriolanus. Ophelia’s description of Hamlet as

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20 Roman virtus is a specific virtue, from the Latin vir [man], consisting of courage, valor, manliness, and excellence of character.
“th’ observed of all observers” acknowledges the claustrophobia that gaze engenders, but the true nature of the audience is hinted at by Rosencrantz’s choice of words in describing the “little eyases” of the children’s companies that “are now the fashion,” who “berattle the common stages,” and who are “most tyrannically clapped for ’t” (*Ham. 2.2.337–40*) [my emphasis]. This “tyranny” of audience expectation and the enforcing of that expectation certainly adds to Hamlet’s paranoia. However, it is not until *Coriolanus* that the Classical gaze, with the ability to shame, becomes the Renaissance gaze, which presents with the power to constitute identity itself.

Shakespeare develops this exaggerated concept of the exceptional Roman in his account of the capture of Corioles. Livy and Plutarch generally agree in their accounts of the retreat from the city followed by the successful attack:

*But Martius was marvelous angry with them, and cried out on them, that it was no time now to looke after spoyle, and to ronne straggling here and there to enriche them selves, whilst the other Consul and their fellowe cittizens peradventure were fighting with their enemies . . . . When they sawe him at his first comming, all bloody, and in a swet, and but with a fewe men following him: some thereupon beganne to be afeard. But sone after, when they sawe him ronne with a lively cheere to the Consul and to take him by the hande, declaring how he had taken the citte of Corioles… then there was not a man but tooke hart againe to him.* (*Life of Cor. 151*)

Heroic though Martius is in Plutarch’s account, Shakespeare both changes the scene to have him enter Corioles alone and invents the fight between him and Aufidius. Thomas remarks, “Plutarch’s magnificent warrior (who enters the city with a few men) becomes in the play superhuman—and isolated.”

22 Ibid., 159.
FIRST CITIZEN. Care for us? True indeed! They ne’er cared for us yet. Suffer us to famish, and their store-houses crammed with grain; make edicts for usury, to support usurers; repeal daily any wholesome act established against the rich, and provide more piercing statutes daily to chain up and restrain the poor. If the wars eat us not up, they will; and there’s all the love they bear us. (Cor. 1.1.78-85)²³

However, in counterpoint to the selfless Martius who rejects Cominius’s offer of a tenth of all of the spoils, requesting only a good horse, the freeing of an old Volscian friend, and accepting the title “Coriolanus,” Shakespeare depicts the people en masse as cowardly and selfish, even if individually, their complaints are reasonable and valid. Chernaik characterizes the conflict in the play as a struggle to define what “Rome” and “Roman” mean. Cominius lauds his troops in battle by the exhortation, “We are come off / like Romans,” and in the third act, condemns the squabbling, saying “This palt’ring / Becomes not Rome” (Cor. 1.7.1-2, 3.1.57–58). Conversely, the herald points out why Martius does become Rome: “Know, Rome, that all alone Martius / did fight / Within Corioles gates .... / Welcome to Rome, renowned Coriolanus!” (Cor. 2.1.161–66).

For Martius, then, the only conception of selfhood which he finds acceptable is the one which most closely personifies Roman *virtus*, which is synonymous with martial courage. Shakespeare signals his recognition of this connection by taking the words of Plutarch, who writes, “valliantnes was honoured in Rome above all other vertues: which they called *virtus*, by the name of vertue itselfe,” and putting them almost verbatim into the mouth of Cominius: “It is held / That valour is the chiefest virtue, and / Most dignifies the haver” (Life of Cor. 144; Cor. 2.2.83–85). Therefore, for the patricians, championed by the aloof Coriolanus, “Roman” describes a set of values consisting largely of patriotism and public service, commonly expressed

through physical bravery—in short, noble qualities appropriate to a self which will justifiably be memorialized by history:

‘Noble’ is itself a key word in the Roman vocabulary; it and its cognates occur eighty-five times in the play, and are insistently associated with the hero, from his first acclamation as ‘noble Martius!’ (1.1.161) to the promise in the final line that he will have ‘a noble memory’ (5.6.154).\(^{24}\)

While Shakespeare clearly recognizes Martius’s version of personal identity to be truly Roman in figuration, less clear is the degree to which he is convinced by its desirability. Volumnia’s assertion of the values she has instilled in Martius are initially unsettling, but still within the bounds of motherly pride at a son’s achievements: “To a cruel war I sent him; from whence he returned, his brows bound with oak. I tell thee, daughter, I sprang not more in joy at first hearing he was a man-child than now in first seeing he had proved himself a man” (1.3.14–18). Within the space of forty lines, however, her words exceed a mother’s pride and begin to elicit something in the audience more akin to shock than to admiration: “had I a dozen sons, each in my love alike and none less dear than thine and my good Martius, I had rather had eleven die nobly for their country than one voluptuously surfeit out of action” (\textit{Cor.} 1.3.14–18, 22–25). In his \textit{Shakespeare and the Constant Romans} (1996), Geoffrey Miles says, “As many critics have noted, the placing of such sentiments in a woman’s mouth provides an ironic perspective on Rome’s masculine values and the unnaturalness of a world in which a mother cheerfully sends her son to death.”\(^{25}\)

Indeed, Shakespeare destabilizes the audience’s faith in Roman \textit{virtus} as an acceptable basis for selfhood, both in the way he depicts Volumnia’s approval of her grandson’s “mammoking” a butterfly as a noble pursuit and in magnifying Martius’s isolation from other


\(^{25}\) Ibid., 18–21.
Romans beyond what is implied in his source material. By the end of her account, the imagery she employs to dismiss Virgilia’s fears becomes a morbid parody of maternal nurturing:

Away, you fool! it more becomes a man
Than gilt his trophy: the breasts of Hecuba,
When she did suckle Hector, look'd not lovelier
Than Hector's forehead when it spit forth blood
At Grecian sword, contemning. (Cor. 1.3.39–43)

By contrast, during the player’s Pyrrhus speech in Hamlet, Hecuba appears as a metonym for maternal and spousal suffering, one specifically asked for by the prince himself—“Come to Hecuba,” he impatiently insists.

But if the gods themselves did see her then
When she saw Pyrrhus make malicious sport
In mincing with his sword her husband’s limbs,
The instant burst of clamor that she made,
(Unless things mortal move them not at all)
Would have made milch the burning eyes of heaven,
And passion in the gods. (2.2.508–14)

The echo of Hamlet reminds Shakespeare’s audience that Hecuba grieves the events which began with the slaying of her son, Hector, at the hands of Achilles, continued through the subsequent death of Achilles at the hands of her younger son, Paris, leading finally to the revenge arc of Pyrrhus, who destroys her husband in front of her eyes. What is a cautionary tale about cycles of violence in Hamlet becomes in Volumnia’s mouth a grotesque caricature of maternal pride. The role of this new Hecuba is to produce heroes who live and die by glorious violence, but while death on the battlefield from a forehead spitting blood has an aesthetic, it is by nature a-theatrical because it has no audience. Other soldiers on the battlefield may witness such deeds, but their own life and death engagement with the events they see disables the boundary of safety between viewer and performer. Only the chronicles of history testify to this
kind of violently heroic death, which is of course the greatest wish both of Volumnia and her son, but absent an audience, the theatrical heroism of Hamlet is no longer possible.

V. Self as Slippage between Performer and Audience

Having destabilized the faith of the audience in the values upon which the identity of Martius is predicated, Shakespeare goes further by questioning the extent to which such values are essentialist features of the great general’s identity in the first place, as opposed to social constructions in the Foucauldian sense. Shakespeare would have known from reading about Seneca that death is the time when playing is put aside, and the subject must come to terms with its authentic self. In terms of an identity that will be left for the edification and admiration of generations to come, in the form of chronicles and *imagines*, the question of what it is that is being left to posterity is one of Shakespeare’s central concerns in *Coriolanus*, given that so much of mortal existence is the playing out of who we think we are—no less for Martius himself, who continually faces the judgment of death. While this is a Senecan concern and consequently a Shakespearean one, Ker cautions that,

[Seneca] does not necessarily mean that these [mimes and costumes put on during life] were misrepresentations—just that none of them guarantees how he will act in the face of death. By contrast, he characterizes the day of death through the anti-theatrical procedures of self-judgment (cf. *de me iudicaturus sum*, §5) and judgment by death itself (cf. *mors de te pronuntiatura est*, §6). On this occasion, it would seem, the person's true relationship to whatever quasi-theatrical role he had been playing can finally be determined.26

In typically Coriolan fashion, the general is in no doubt who death will find him to be when theatricality is cast aside and the authentic self is laid bare for history to judge.

His famous rebuke to his mother for criticizing his arrogance with the plebeians is the ultimate Shakespearian statement of an essential identity: “Why did you wish me milder? would you have me / False to my nature? Rather say I play / The man I am” (*Cor.* 3.2.14–16). Martius’s firm belief that his essential identity is convergent with the theatrical role he plays in life is at the heart of the tragedy, an argument that could also be made for Caesar, who boasts, “But I am constant as the northern star, / Of whose true-fixed and resting quality / There is no fellow in the firmament” (*JC* 3.1.60–62). However, Caesar is not especially concerned about the theatricality inherent in such declamations; theatrics have a different place in the Caesarian world, as he demonstrates in the pantomime of the crown at the festival of Lupercal:

> It was mere foolery: I did not mark it. I saw Mark Antony offer him a crown—yet ’twas not a crown neither, ’twas one of these coronets—and, as I told you, he put it by once—but, for all that, to my thinking, he would fain have had it. Then he offered it to him again; then he put it by again; but, to my thinking, he was very loath to lay his fingers off it. And then he offered it the third time. He put it the third time by;  

> ………………………………………………………

> If the tag-rag people did not clap him and hiss him according as he pleased and displeased them, as they use to do the players in the theatre, I am no true man. (*JC*. 1.2.235–60)

Such theatrical pandering to the mob is unthinkable for Coriolanus, not only because he regards the plebeian audience as unworthy of participation in his accomplishments but because he believes *virtus* and theatricality are inherently antithetical to each other. Valor and excellence of character are Platonic forms embodied by people like himself, in Martius’s mind, not constructed values tacitly agreed upon by Romans and general—audience and performer.

Certainly, the Rome of the later play is less politically and morally complex than the Rome of Caesar; the Republican system of government in the era of Coriolanus has not yet lost
pace with the growth of the state and thus become vulnerable to the charisma, hubris, and ambition of its greatest generals. Shakespeare appears to purposefully choose the earlier context for his last true tragedy specifically so that he can isolate and more intensely interrogate the idea that the constancy of a fixed self is the basis of identity. “Let the first budger die the other’s slave / And the gods doom him after!” Martius tells Aufidius before they fight, and he observes of the soldiers who fled in battle, “The mouse ne'er shunn'd the cat as they did budge / From rascals worse than they” (Cor. 1.8.5–6, 1.6.44–45). In fact Martius conceives of his deepest negative emotions in terms of inconstancy, telling Aufidius: “I'll fight with none but thee, for I do hate thee / Worse than a promise-breaker” (1.8.1–2). Playing a man other than the man he is seems impossible to Martius because doing so would imply that Roman values are not constant and fixed within the essential self.

This is at the heart of his hatred for the plebeians who are not truly Roman, Martius believes, in large part because they have no essential self:

He that trusts to you,
Where he should find you lions, finds you hares;
Where foxes, geese: you are no surer, no,
Than is the coal of fire upon the ice,
Or hailstone in the sun. Your virtue is
To make him worthy whose offence subdues him,
And curse that justice did it. Who deserves greatness
Deserves your hate; and your affections are
A sick man's appetite, who desires most that
Which would increase his evil. He that depends
Upon your favours swims with fins of lead,
And hews down oaks with rushes. Hang ye! Trust Ye?
With every minute you do change a mind,
And call him noble that was now your hate,
Him vile that was your garland. (1.1.169–83)

This Shakespearean Rome is one where the identities of generals able to embody the constancy, nobility and virtus in which the “hares” and “geese” can see themselves reflected become
desirable commodities, seized upon by patrician families for display in their atria. Shakespeare does not stop there but rather follows the ideal of Roman nobility in *Coriolanus* to its logical end by having it refuse to make itself public. The tragedy of the play is that Martius too late learns Roman “nobility” is a social construct rather than an inherent feature of himself, and when he refuses to play his part in showing how well he has mastered Rome’s tropes, refusing in a sense to take his place in the history of Rome, what he thought was an essential identity unravels.

Shakespeare’s version of the great general who eschews the expectation that he will perform for his plebeian audience by showing his wounds as the price of admission to consular office is in keeping with the nature of his aloof Coriolanus but not with the raw material he finds in *Lives*. The showing of wounds received in service of Rome accompanied by a humbling of the self in the market place by those running for high office was a well-established process by the time of Martius, and Shakespeare was in no doubt about the tradition if for no other reason than Plutarch makes it explicit:

> For the custome of Rome was at that time, that suche as dyd sue for any office, should for certen dayes before be in the market place, only with a poore gowne on their backes, and without any coate underneath, to praye the cittizens to remember them at the daye of election: which was thus devised, either to move the people the more, by requesting them in suche meane apparell, or els because they might shewe them their woundes they had gotten in the warres in the service of the common wealth, as manifest markes and testimonie of their valliantnes. (*Life of Cor.* 158)

In the second act, Martius’s audience is already primed to accept what tradition dictates, and in this sense, the audience in the forum is prepared to perform its prescribed role in historical events, as verbalized by the third citizen: “for if he show us his wounds and tell us his deeds, we are to put our tongues into those wounds and speak for them. So, if he tell us his noble deeds, we must also tell him our noble acceptance of them” (*Cor.* 2.3.5–9).
This is the key moment for Coriolanus. His audience signals that it is time for performer and audience to co-create the identity by which the state and citizenry will define him and by which the general defines himself. He has written all of his part, affirming the qualities the audience has invested with value, and the quality of his work must be submitted to their gaze for final approval. In form the approval the audience seeks to give is its validation that Martius embodies the value system the audience chooses to believe is reflective of itself. However, since this kind of viewing is inherently narcissistic, embodying the requisite excellences is insufficient; the general must be able to perform them for the gaze, in this case by the showing of his wounds.

This is how the social network constructs identity—not by autonomous action from an essential interior but in the slippage between observer and observed. At this point in the play, Shakespeare brings the drama to a locus where history, theatricality, nobility, and history intersect. Certainly all the dramatic Coriolanus has to do in order to have his imago take its place with his ancestors is play along, and yet at the crucial moment, Shakespeare has his version of Martius turn away—refuse to share the signs of martial achievement with his people, beginning with an exclusionary rather than an inclusionary declamation:

CORIOLANUS. What must I say?—
'I Pray, sir'—Plague upon't! I cannot bring
My tongue to such a pace. 'Look, sir, my wounds!
I got them in my country's service, when
Some certain of your brethren roar'd and ran
From the noise of our own drums.' (2.3.51–56)

Martius’s body blow to the citizens’ moment of affirmation, when their greatest general drags them into glorious history in his wake, instantly alarms Menenius who senses a departure from the script, exclaiming, “O me, the gods! / You must not speak of that; you must desire them / To think upon you” (2.3.57–59). Here, the historical Menenius voices alarm through his dramatic analogue, for his plebeian background alerts him to the danger Coriolanus’s words pose to the
city itself. Rome has developed through a process of deed, performance of the deed, and reception of the deed. It is a society whose entire sense of itself is inherently theatrical, yet Coriolanus misses this point—or chooses to be blind to it—despite the warning of Menenius.

At this pivotal point in the play, fidelity to historical events takes second place for Shakespeare, not for dramaturgical reasons, as he frequently does with time compression and dialogue reassignment, but because he wants to engage the inherent contradiction in the Roman mindset—that the constancy and *virtus* of his ideal Roman taken to their logical conclusions are antithetical to begging for favor. Similarly, Shakespeare’s concern in *Hamlet*, that the private self is forced by autocratic power into the public realm, remains an issue here where kingly authority is replaced by the expectations of history. Plutarch records the events in the forum and the demand to perform as the wounded Roman servant quite differently:

> Now Martius following this custome, shewed many woundes and cuts apon his bodie, which he had receyved in seventeene yeres service in the warres, and in many sundrie battells, being ever the formest man that dyd set out feete to fight. So that there was not a man emong the people, but was ashamed of him selfe, to refuse so valliant a man: and one of them sayed to another, We must needes chuse him Consul, there is no remedie.’ (*Life of Cor.* 159)

At issue is not the veracity of the wounds or the authenticity of the man who bears them, as the Fourth Citizen makes clear, stating, “You have received many wounds for your country.” The punctuation and phrasing makes this a statement, but Martius receives it as a question that he will leave open: “I will not seal your knowledge with showing them. / I will make much of your voices, and so trouble you no further” (*Cor.* 2.3.105–09). Shakespeare’s tribunes are able to make the plebeians change their minds by subterfuge and rhetoric, in distinction to Plutarch, who gives the tribunes no role in the failure of Martius to win the consulship.

> But when the daye of election was come, and that Martius came to the market place with great pompe, accompanied with all the Senate, and the whole Nobilitie of the cittie about him, who sought to make him Consul, with the greatest instance
and intreatie they could, or ever attempted for any man or matter: then the love and good will of the common people, turned straight to an hate and envie toward him, fearing to put this office of soveraine authoritie into his handes, being a man somewhat partiall toward the nobilitie, and of great credit and authoritie amongst the Patricians, and as one they might doubt would take away alltogether the libertie from the people. Whereupon for these considerations, they refused Martius in the ende, and made two others that were suters, Consuls. *(Life of Cor. 159)*

Thomas notes that Shakespeare emphasizes the isolation of his character by giving him no entourage during this process, whereas, Plutarch writes that he was accompanied by young noblemen who looked to him as their wartime leader and inspiration, and that Shakespeare’s plebeians are more generous while his Martius is more stubborn.27 This observation, while objectively true, underestimates the significance of the general’s refusal to perform for his audience and misses the point of Shakespeare’s emphasizing it. Indeed, the decision to have the dramatic Martius buck tradition is important enough to Shakespeare that he has the repercussions of it echo in the plebeians’ dialogue throughout the rest of the scene.

To understand why Shakespeare does not follow Plutarch and the reasoning behind for his decision making in 2.3, it is helpful to review the tradition of wound-showing in Roman history and its reception. While the plebeians are initially generous to Martius, as Thomas points out, the general’s refusal to let the people of Rome share in Rome’s greatness by viewing the cost of his own accomplishments is nevertheless a serious issue for them. The Second Citizen rejects Sicinius’s accusation that Martius has insulted them, but acknowledges, “he should have show'd us / His marks of merit, wounds received for's country,” an admission seized upon by the tribune, who plays devil’s advocate:

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SICINIUS. Why, so he did, I am sure.
CITIZENS. No, no; no man saw 'em.
THIRD CITIZEN. He said he had wounds, which he could show
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27 Thomas 161.
in private;
And with his hat, thus waving it in scorn,
'I would be consul,' says he; 'aged custom,
But by your voices, will not so permit me;
Your voices therefore.' When we granted that,
Here was 'I thank you for your voices: thank you;
Your most sweet voices; now you have left your voices,
I have no further with you.' Was not this mockery? (Cor. 2.3.161–71)

The power of battle scars to act as a metonym for the authentic self has already been addressed in chapter two, when Antonius rips open the tunic of the old general and consular, Manius Aquilius, but the relationship of scars to history and their exchange value with imagines bears further comment here. It is perhaps more clearly understood through Sallust’s account of Marius’s consular oration in 129 BCE, justifying his selection to lead the campaign against Jugurtha over that of the younger nobiles, related in the De Bello Iugurthina (The Jugurthine War). On taking office, it was traditional for the newly elected consul to place himself in the historical line of his great ancestors and promise to emulate their deeds, but for a novus homo like Marius, with no ancestor masks to show or ancestral deeds to point to, circumstances necessitated the deployment of rhetorical antitheses, whereby, deeds and work takes the place of words and inherited authenticity. According to Sallust, Marius attempts to make himself the true heir of the great Romans of the past on the basis that his virtus is the same as theirs, and he does not rely on imagines, which are mentioned five times in the speech, or famous ancestors, which are mentioned nine times.28 The consul inverts this value system, claiming that such things are used to excuse the failings of current officers and to justify their arrogance.

So closely linked is the patrician Roman self to history that “[a]s the argument develops it is not always easy to separate the ancestors from their imagines. In the setting of a public

28 Flower 19.
meeting, the *imagines* appear as useful and accessible symbols, evocative of the archaic tone and simple values the speaker is aspiring to.”

Marius rounds off his speech by proclaiming,

> I am not able to inspire confidence by parading the masks or triumphs or consulships of my ancestors, but, if need arises, I can show spears and standards presented for valour, medals, other military decorations, and besides the scars on the front of my body. These are my masks, these my ‘nobility’, not inherited as in their case, but which I myself strove to acquire through many labours and dangers. (*Jug.* 85).

It is impossible to know how successful was Marius’s attempt to invert custom by assigning to masks and statues the negative qualities of inaction, corruption, and nepotism, while claiming for his own banners and scars achieved in battle, the true *virtus* of bravery, service and personal authenticity. According to Flower, “the prestige of earlier leaders, which was especially represented to the people by their masks, is a force in Roman politics which Sallust’s Marius chooses not to ignore or simply to belittle. However dismissive he is of contemporary political opponents he must take account of their ancestors, to the extent that their deeds live on in the imagination of his audience.”

The speech is no doubt largely Sallust’s invention based on contemporary accounts, and none of Marius’s own writings survive. Sallust expects his Roman audience will respond favorably to the general’s use of battle scars as a marker of his authentic Roman identity, and it is worth noting that Marius was subsequently elected consul a record seven times.

While by the refusal of his Coriolanus to reveal his wounds, Shakespeare’s choice to ignore the lessons of Sallust and to reverse the narrative of Plutarch affords his general a moment of arrogant dignity, clearly more is at stake than simply an opportunity to show the pig-headedness suggested by Thomas. Martius is aware of his role in history and perhaps even thinks

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29 Ibid., 19–20.
30 Qtd. in Flower 21.
31 Flower 23.
of his own future *imago* that will be passed to his son after his death. Thus, while he refuses Cominius’s offer of a tenth of the spoils from the sacked Corioles, he does accept the agnomen “Coriolanus.” Unlike money and slaves which are temporal, such a title is eternal and worth passing to future generations. This kind of thinking is emblematic of the fact that, in his own mind, he already embodies the virtues which mark him as the ultimate Roman and, therefore, he believes that his place in history is secured—a belief he confirms to Aufidius:

> Cut me to pieces, Volsces. Men and lads, Stain all your edges on me. Boy! False hound, If you have writ your annals true, ’tis there That, like an eagle in a dove-cote, I Flutter’d your Volscians in Corioles. Alone I did it. Boy! (*Cor. 5.6.111–16*)

In the worldview of Martius, an identity which is strong enough to flutter the Volscians alone is incompatible with one that could subject itself to the ignominy of a self-abasing performance for the edification of undeservers. This after all is the same audience whom he addresses as “dissentious rogues / That, rubbing the poor itch of your opinion, / Make yourselves scabs” (*Cor. 1.1.161–63*).

In Martius’s mind, the plebeians are not truly Romans. However, authentic Romans like himself, who embody all that is noble and excellent, enable them to exist, even if only in their animalistic state: “you cry against the noble senate, who, / Under the gods, keep you in awe, which else / Would feed on one another” (1.1.185–87). Similarly, they are “rats,” and “worshipful mutineers” (1.1.248), but this is not simply class prejudice. Martius is truly above petty concerns, as Cominius notes after the battle of Corioles:

> Our spoils he kick’d at, And look’d upon things precious as they were The common muck of the world: he covets less Than misery itself would give, rewards
His deeds with doing them, and is content
To spend the time to end it. (2.2.124–29)

The importance which the common people placed on the deeds of noble patricians must be
understood in the context of plebeian suffrage. Until 471 BCE, Rome operated on the basis of the
thirty curiae established during Rome’s founding. Each curiae consisted of a noble family to
which plebian families were attached in a patronage system. The curiae voted in the Comitia
Curiata, but such voting was available only to the patrician class: the common people were
indirectly represented by the vote of their noble patrons. Not until the establishment of the
tribunes of the plebs around 494 did the people have any real voice in Roman government, and
even then the plebian assembly had authority only over matters that related exclusively to the
plebs. In such a system, vicarious participation in the celebrity of great generals was the primary
connection between ordinary Romans and the city state as a concept.

The general’s refusal “To brag unto them, thus I did, and thus; / Show them th’unaching
scars which I should hide,” is, from the citizenry’s perspective, a refusal to allow them to
participate in their own history, but Martius understands that his acquiescence to the tradition
would be to empower them, “As if I had receiv’d them for the hire / Of their breath only!”
(2.2.148–50). He entreats his patrician peers in language that suggests he perceives the
theatricality of the act: “It is a part / That I shall blush in acting,” and this is an important
distinction for Shakespeare (2.2.144–45). Unlike perhaps a triumph, which Coriolanus would
presumably welcome, the theatrical performance implies an active rather than a passive
audience—a different kind of viewing, and the kind from which Martius must beg release:

I do beseech you,
Let me o'erleap that custom; for I cannot
Put on the gown, stand naked and entreat them,
For my wounds' sake, to give their suffrage. Please you
That I may pass this doing. (Cor. 2.2.135–39)
Unfortunately for the great general, just as the social network has determined that he will be called “Coriolanus” and have infused that name with value, an active audience is the type that bestows and takes away honors, the markers of identity through which Martius measures his interior.

V. *The Spanish Tragedy* and the Renaissance Gaze

During the years when Tudor and Stuart tragedy was at its most popular, Shakespeare and his audience’s understanding of the power dynamic between viewer and viewed became increasingly sophisticated. Yet in some ways, the tropes established in Thomas Kyd’s *The Spanish Tragedy* remained unchanged until the composition of *Coriolanus*, some three decades later. Part of the play’s influence was its ubiquity: from 1592-97 only *The Jew of Malta* and the lost work *The Wise Man of West Chester* exceeded the twenty-nine recorded performances of Kyd’s play, and the text went through eleven published editions. Until *The Spanish Tragedy*, the device of dumb shows and the play-within-a-play typically served the same purpose—the one surmised by Ophelia at the beginning of the *Mousetrap*: “Belike this show imports the argument of the play” (*Ham.* 3.2.136). Beyond summary, Tudor audience members watching the audience of the play-within-the-play had the experience of watching their own dramatic avatars react to the same themes and *topos* that they themselves experienced, and in this way the on-stage audience also had a didactic function similar to the chorus in Greek dramaturgy, if in somewhat simplified form. Such a structure reinforced the *theatrum mundi*, with which mid-fifteenth-century audiences were already familiar from Classical plays, and like those plays of

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antiquity, it generally reiterated that fate—or in this case providence—determined outcomes for both the characters and the on-stage audience, just as it did for the off-stage theater-goers in their daily lives. *The Spanish Tragedy*, however, introduced a new set of possibilities into the Elizabethan playgoers’ consciousness—that the action of the play could work against the predetermination of the frame sequence, and that the viewer’s expectation could affect the action.

The plays opens with the expected deterministic chorus consisting, in this case, of Revenge and the Ghost of the murdered Don Andrea, deterministic because the events about to unfold are already known to Revenge:

Then know, Andrea, that thou art arrived
Where thou shalt see the author of thy death,
Don Balthazar the prince of Portingale,
Deprived of life by Bel-Imperia.
Here sit we down to see the mystery,
And serve for Chorus in this tragedy. (*ST* 1.1.86–91)

While both characters remain in view of the off-stage audience and provide a commentary on the action, it is Revenge who manages the drama, rather than the apparently passive Ghost of Andrea, and of the two, it is the Ghost of Andrea who offers the audience members a point of view much like their own. His role as passive observer reminds them that they are subject to supernatural forces which direct their lives in the manner of Classical tragedy and earlier Renaissance drama. In fact unlike the Ghost of King Hamlet, who actively and forcefully puts the events of the play in motion, The Ghost of Andrea does not seek out Revenge but rather is sent back to the mortal plane by Proserpine after the judges in Hades disagree whether he should go to the martial fields with Hector and Achilles, because he died in battle, or to the lovers’ fields, because he died for love. It is not even clear that the Ghost feels revenge is necessarily

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warranted: “For in the late conflict with Portingale, / My valor drew me into danger’s mouth, / Till life to death made passage through my wounds” (ST 1.1.15–17). By watching a tableau unfold which he did not ask for, featuring actors who move to a script they did not write, the Ghost of Andrea confirms the off-stage audience’s expectations for their own viewer position—that neither they nor the players they watch get to determine the action or the outcomes.

As the play progresses, however, the Ghost of Andrea becomes impatient with the pace of the action that he is promised in the first act after witnessing Hieronimo’s masque of the three kings, performed for the Spanish king’s court:

ANDREA. Come we for this from depth of underground,  
To see him feast that gave me my death's wound?  
These pleasant sights are sorrow to my soul—  
Nothing but league, and love, and banqueting!  
REVENGE. Be still, Andrea; ere we go from hence,  
I'll turn their friendship into fell despite,  
Their love to mortal hate, their day to night.  
Their hope into despair, their peace to war,  
Their joys to pain, their bliss to misery.  
(ST 1.5.1–9)

By the end of the first act, the didactic function of watching an audience watching a play lets the off-stage audience know that the viewer’s expectation can alter the pacing and framing of the action, not only from the Ghost’s impatience at the pacing of the play-within-the-play, but also from the manner in which the audience for the masque—the Spanish King—is able to end the action of the play within-the-play-within-the-play. When he is discomfited at the introduction of John of Gaunt, who led the English to victory over the Spanish, he comments, “My lord, I fear we sit but over-long / Unless our dainties were more delicate” (1.4.175–76). The weight of expectation form the audience is an especially powerful feature of the Early Modern stage where, as Andrew Gurr has discussed in some detail in his Playgoing in Shakespeare’s London, the

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barrier between audience and players was a far more permeable membrane than is the case in contemporary stage productions, even to the point where the wealthiest patrons could sit in chairs on-stage at Blackfriars.

As the drama unfolds, the Ghost becomes increasingly agitated, his status as passive audience becoming less tolerable, and he reminds the stage-director, Revenge, that there is an expectation which must be met. After Horatio is hanged and stabbed in the arbor by Lorenzo, Balthazar, Pedrigano and Serberine, the Ghost complains, “I look'd that Balthazar should have been slain: / But 'tis my friend Horatio that is slain, / And they abuse fair Bel-imperia, / On whom I doted more than all the world” (ST 2.6.2–6). In The Spanish Tragedy, it is incumbent on “the stage manager” to offer assurances that the Ghost will be empowered by the events which transpire on the stage: “The sickle comes not, till the corn be ripe. / Be still; and ere I lead thee from this place, / I'll show thee Balthazar in heavy case” (ST 2.6.9–11). This understanding of the power of the audience gaze is a *topos* appearing throughout the Shakespearean canon, and so in many ways, it is the Renaissance rather than Classical gaze from which Coriolanus shrinks. He is not asked to lead slaves through the streets in a triumphal show of power, but to perform an intimate revealing of the private self which involves a sharing of his personal *virtus*, an unveiling of the Roman self that is part of him rather than part of Rome.

By the end of his play, Kyd has maneuvered the viewers of *The Spanish Tragedy* and the players into reversed roles, whereby the Ghost is giving the orders because his gaze, which has been promised a revenge tragedy, is not being served.

GHOST. Revenge, awake!
REVENGE. Awake? for why?
GHOST. Awake, Revenge! for thou art ill-advis'd
To sleep away what art warned to watch!
........................................
GHOST. Awake, Revenge! Reveal this mystery!
Hieronimo’s final move in which he tricks Lorenzo and Balthazar into acting in the drama of their own deaths, casts further doubt on who is directing the drama, which seemed to be predetermined by Proserpine from the beginning. As Joel B. Altman says, “Kyd did create a frame that points in one direction and an action that points in another.” This is to argue that while the frame is constructed deterministically by Proserpine to be stage managed by Revenge, the actions of Hieronimo and Bel-imperia determine the actual outcome, although one could also make the case that the Ghost of Andrea puts this in motion by awaking Revenge to the events on stage in the first place.

In some ways Hieronimo makes the same decision as Coriolanus, in that when ordered by the king to give testimony to what he has done, he bites off his tongue rather than speak and uses the knife they have brought for him to sharpen his pen to stab the Duke and himself rather than write a confession. In actuality Hieronimo has already told the major players on the stage at the end of the play everything they need to know, and the viceroy has already guessed at Bel-imperia’s involvement. Biting off his own tongue and stabbing himself serves only to disable the viewer experience of the audience of nobles that remain alive. Having determined the action of his own revenge play, Soliman and Perseda, for which he has been the sole true audience, he refuses to yield that power to the tyranny of the gaze that would see him recite a performance of the larger play, The Spanish Tragedy.

VI. As if a Man Were Author of Himself

The situation Coriolanus finds himself in is somewhat more complicated than that of Hieronimo, in that the essential self he thinks he is—the embodiment of Roman nobility—turns out to be too inflexible for the Romans. Hieronimo seizes agency for himself, which doubles as selfhood in Kyd’s play, and then ends the performance. Coriolanus is not able to follow this sequence of events because the Romans require that he change roles to accommodate the expectations of different audiences. In this case, the soldier’s steadfastness must give way to the deceptions and evasions of the politician. Volumnia calls on him to do such: “My praises made thee first a soldier, so, / To have my praise for this, perform a part / Thou hast not done before” (Cor. 3.2.107–10). The ignominy of being called on to perform with his wounds like an actor on the stage, of being required to meet the expectant gaze of an audience of rats that would share in his glory, being denied the consulship, and eventually being banished from Rome all teach Martius what is ultimately the source of his tragedy. Nobility and virtus, the authority of the imaginies and the glory attributed to ancestors: these are things created by Rome and given by Rome, and as such, they exist only in the eyes of Romans. By refusing to allow the people to participate in the dynamic give-and-take of Roman glory that he embodies, Martius finds that Rome empties those qualities of value, denying him what he thought was essential to himself and creating an identity vacuum.

He hints at the seeds of self-awareness already in his mind in the second act, but notably, he focuses on voices rather than eyes. Martius is willing to accept the vocalized acclaim of the triumph in the same way that he accepts the name “Coriolanus” because these things are passively given, unlike the audience’s active gaze—a form of group surveillance—that would see him stand and give witness to an interior that meets its approval:
Your voices! For your voices I have fought,
Watch’d for your voices; for your voices, bear
Of wounds two dozen odd; battles thrice six
I have seen and heard of; for your voices have
Done many things, some less, some more: your voices!
Indeed I would be consul. (Cor. 2.3.125–30)

Perhaps the character who understands this quality of Martius’s nature best is Aufidius, who muses that his nemesis must be who he thinks he is and “[n]ot to be other than one thing, not moving / From th’ casque to th’ cushion, but commanding peace / Even with the same austerity and garb / As he controlled the war” (Cor. 4.7.42–45). Thus emptied of himself, his bold claim that “I’ll never / Be such a gosling to obey instinct, but stand / As if a man were author of himself / And knew no other kin” has no ground on which to stand, and Coriolanus can only vacillate in distress, “I melt, and am not / Of stronger earth than others” (Cor. 5.3.34–37, 28–29).

Now the self that fluttered the Volsces and which was previously described by Menenius as a machine of war, suddenly becomes hyperaware of its own theatricality: “Like a dull actor now / I have forgot my part and I am out, / Even to a full disgrace” (5.3.40–43).

In his own Roman universe, Coriolanus exists like Brutus, creating the building blocks of his society out of his own excellence and offering it to history as an exemplum of what Rome is and should be. Within the confines of that conception, perhaps he could be author of himself, knowing no other kin, although the events of his historical life seem to suggest otherwise. While Rome was a social network which operated through a sophisticated system of performance and reception, both its senatorial class and its common citizens perceived this as a top-down system, which in many ways it was. The Classical gaze, therefore, tends toward a passive reception of what is on offer, similar to the Mediaeval gaze but with the moral of the lesson determined by patrician values rather than ecclesiastical. Shakespeare subjects Martius not to a Classical audience, greedy for the excellences of character generated from the essential interior, but to the
tyranny of the Renaissance gaze, which assigns in the first place the excellences it feels entitled to see performed. Bruce R. Smith says of tragedy’s treatment by Renaissance editors and writers, “[w]hen finally, commentators add Erasmus’s Christian canons to Quintilian’s ethical ideas and Cicero’s legal inquisition, the question becomes totally one of moral judgment: are the hero’s actions right or are they wrong? It is before this tribunal of Cicero, Quintilian, and Erasmus that tragic heroes must pass in Renaissance editions….” Smith’s assessment is accurate for Elizabethan tragedies, whose reception is mediated by these always-present authorities. Hence, under the weight of this Classical audience, Hamlet perceives the deaths of Fortinbras’s twenty thousand to be for a “trick of fame” which is also “a fantasy.” The late tragedies, however, no longer concern themselves with questions of right and wrong, and fame is no longer a trick or a fantasy but an unavoidable component of selfhood. Identity in the Jacobean tragedies becomes not simply a matter of achieving fame for embodying desirable personal qualities but of being celebrated for following the script the audience has in mind—of achieving true celebrity in the modern sense.

In giving his most Roman of Roman heroes the realization that all his mighty deeds have been for the sole purpose of eliciting the approving gaze of the common rabble, Shakespeare seems to deny the truth of essential nature and thus answer the question he wrestled with in Hamlet. His final answer to “who’s there?” is society. The Renaissance gaze in the end is not the Classical gaze and the tragic interior of the last plays is neither stoically isolationist nor epically heroic but a product of surveillance. This is identity co-authored by the watcher behind the arras who monitors how well the performance meets the prescribed aesthetic—the world of Polonius and Claudius rather than Hamlet and Pyrrhus. For Shakespeare’s heroic general, this is an

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unbearable truth, and like all celebrities who fail to acknowledge the forces that create that
celebrity in the first place, he is destroyed by it. Hence, Martius can only respond to his
banishment from Rome with “I banish you!” (3.3.123). Yet ironically, in making this same retort
as contemporary divas who tire of their public’s intrusive demands, Coriolanus signals his
position as the first Shakespearean character with a truly modern interior.
Conclusion

I. The Classical Gaze Finds Itself

Coriolanus’s rejects fame because the cost of accepting it—the abandonment of his fantasy of self-generation—is too high. The Renaissance gaze which created him in the first place is not solely responsible for his creation, but rather selfhood and identity in Shakespeare’s last plays exists in a negotiation between performer and audience. The great general does not entirely have selfhood taken out of his hands, but it is true that he is offered only the byline of the co-creator, not sole authorship, and he is too much of an isolationist to engage in a participatory concept of self-fashioning. He also does not lack the opportunity to have some version of autonomy, the autonomy to act in accordance with the wishes of audience or not. This is the Heideggerian choice, which is to say the chance of the hero or statesman to open up an existential clearing (Ereignis) in which new actions not previously determined by society become possible. Here too, Martius is disabled by his desire to open existential spaces that belong solely to him. He is a Classical figure in the true sense, but a man who has been raised to thrive in the Classical gaze is far too fragile to survive the demands of the Renaissance gaze. The exposure of this difference is something Shakespeare is willing to bend history to examine, as he does by abandoning his Plutarchan source after using it merely to set the stage. This raises the question of how the Classical gaze, if such a thing can be postulated, becomes the Renaissance gaze and how the two are different.
Of course this argument has examined these questions through the lens of literature, and literary selves must by necessity be stylized versions of actual selves, mediated by the genres in which they appear—in this case rhetoric, epic, and stoic theatricality, all within a tragic framework. Sometimes Classical genres reach the Renaissance by direct line of sight and sometimes they are mediated by the intervening tropes of Mediaevalism, but in all cases Renaissance writers are modifying what they find in Classical genre to accommodate their own experience. This is another way of saying that the reception of the Classics in the Renaissance is itself a negotiation, often one that uses Classical tools of interpretation, such as the dramaturgical advice of Cicero, Horace, Quintilian, and—later—Aristotle. In this sense Classical thinkers re-find themselves across the centuries, and so the Renaissance gaze is initially a rehearsal of the Classical gaze filtered through the interposition of Christianity.

II. Hamlet: A Classical Hero for a Classical Audience

Hamlet and Coriolanus and have taken up much of the course of the argument presented here because of their utility in understanding the connection between audience and self, in that while they have obvious differences in temperament, they share very similar construction. The great general and the Danish prince differ not so much in who they are but rather in the audience gaze to which they are subjected. In 1600 Shakespeare still sees his characters largely though the Classical lens because that is how he understands the expectation of the audience of which he is himself a part. Certainly he has begun experimenting with elements that will develop into the Renaissance gaze to which he subjects the last tragedies, in line with the changing tastes and priorities of his rapidly transitioning culture. However, Hamlet is almost entirely constructed to meet the expectations of a Classical (or at least Classically-educated) audience looking for
edification, and if the audience looks for participation, it expects to find it in the weighing of an argument rather than judging of a person.

The prince has famously become a touchstone in popular culture for vacillation and procrastination, one who cannot perform to his own and his dead father’s expectations because he is made up entirely of self-doubt and second-guesses. To see the prince in such a light, however, is to turn the Renaissance gaze on him, as his author does on Coriolanus, which is also our own contemporary gaze. The fallaciousness of viewing Hamlet’s interior this way is that Shakespeare himself has not fully settled on this model of participatory co-authorship yet, and more particularly, it creates the dissonances of Hamlet’s troublesome callousness. His callousness disappears when he is more properly observed through Classical expectations of behavior in the way that Shakespeare, himself, does. The prince has trouble determining the correct path ahead because of a variety of circumstantial variables within his own dramatic environment, but as a character he never second-guesses and he certainly does not regret mistakes. Where he uses the language of regret or error, it appears in the cursory fashion of one who has created an inconvenience for another or for himself. Hamlet’s decision not to kill Claudius at prayer is just one of many examples where we see the prince through our own expectations rather than through those of the late Elizabethan audience. His re-evaluation of the wisdom in killing a murderer who is in the act of divesting himself of his sins, when stripped of our contemporary a priori decision to interpret Hamlet as a procrastinator, becomes exactly what he says it is: a poor return on the circumstances of his own father’s unchristian death.

Aristotle puts it this way: “the good man never finds fault with himself at the moment of his act, like the incontinent, nor the later with the earlier man, like the penitent, nor the earlier with the later, like the liar” (Eudemian Ethics [1240b] 22–4). The translators of the Oxford
Aristotle choose the adjective “penitent,” but in the original Greek, the word is μεταμελητικός, from the family of Greek words relating to regret and remorse, of which Fulkerson has this to say:

The verb μεταμελεί (metamelei, literally, ‘it is a care later on’, an impersonal verb) and its related nouns μεταμέλεια and μετάμελος (metameleia, metamelos: ‘aftercare’) are one of the primary ways remorse behaviour is denoted in Greek. There is also an adjective, μεταμελητικός, (metameletikos, inclined to feel metameleia), rare but of great importance. Etymology provides my definitions, but these words are most often rendered into English by ‘regret’, ‘repent’, and ‘feel remorse for’. As Kovacs (1980) has noted, metameleia is rarely assigned a positive value.¹

What is notable about Aristotle’s definition is that he does not regard the “penitent” (metameletikos) man who regrets his mistaken action as someone to be admired. As discussed in chapter two, this supports Muellner’s contention that Achilles may feel regret at the loss of so many Achaeans through his own inaction or the loss of Patroklos while wearing Achilles’s armor, but he does not feel remorse at the decisions taken by the earlier version of himself. It is only the modern audience that would regard Hamlet’s failure to immediately act on revenge as inconsistency: “[i]ndeed, for Aristotle, the metameletikos (the use of the adjective is significant, as identifying a characterological state of being) seems to suffer from a chronic condition, wherein he habitually changes his mind about the right thing to do, and so he is viewed as unreliable rather than as making progress.”² Hamlet never questions the right thing to do; he simply questions why he has yet to do it and the best way to go about doing it.

The Renaissance gaze, which is our own gaze, tends to see semantic games at work in Hamlet, especially when the prince seems to be talking his way out of accepting moral culpability for his actions. According to Laurel Fulkerson, “[t]he remorseful individual in

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¹ Laurel Fulkerson, No Regrets: Remorse in Classical Antiquity (Oxford UP 2013) 27.
² Ibid., 10.
antiquity is, first and foremost, a person who has failed to act well rather than one who has
learned a lesson. So where the modern observer is likely to privilege progress over initial
mistake, the ancient observer sees the error much more vividly.”\(^3\) In this her assessment
correlates with Konstan’s view, following Aristotle, that the Greeks did not regard “inward
change of character as a condition for reconciliation.”\(^4\) Such a position is concentric with the
value that ancient Greek societies placed on constancy as being the hallmark of the admirable
self, something Shakespeare acknowledges in Caesar’s claim to be fixed as the northern star (cf.
chapter two), and it has the added utility of eliminating the need to establish sincerity. Certainly
the prince’s elisions, puns, and evasions have a tendency to foreground themselves, in that they
are convergent with today’s concerns about the misuse of rhetoric in a “post-factual age,” where
claim and fact often seem to be regarded equal weight.

The Classical gaze, however, sees Hamlet’s reactions to be entirely consistent with his
status as a prince and a hero in the Homeric mold because that gaze craves the didactic quality of
the heroic exemplum, not as a reflection of itself in the manner of Coriolanus’s audience but
more in common with the viewers of Medieval morality plays:

high-status individuals in the Graeco-Roman world are extremely reluctant to
admit that they have made a mistake, and numerous ancient sources suggest that
any change of behaviour or mind is *in itself* problematic. So apology is replaced,
for the most part, by continued defence of one’s actions, attacks upon others, and
tortuous self-justifications. The phrase ‘high-status individuals’ in my phrasing is
important, as it also seems to be the case that those lower down on the social scale
were readier to admit mistakes, or were seen as more prone to do so.\(^5\)

The prince regrets the loss of Polonius *qua* Polonius and, presumably, the loss to Ophelia, but
Polonius has been “a wretched, rash, intruding fool,” who “find’st to be too busy is some

\(^3\) Ibid., 7.


danger” (*Ham.* 3.4.29, 31). Hamlet’s ability to regard the dispatching of his uncle’s counselor as the unfortunate end of a fool who has learned a hard lesson about being a busybody is not callousness, rather it allows the prince to sidestep the weakness of being *metameletikos*. More striking is his attitude to the death of Ophelia in 5.1, a scene typically interpreted as simply another example of Hamlet’s self-absorption, such that his tirade centers on his own grief without acknowledgement that his rejection, cruelty, and the murder of her father might have been ill-advised. However, Ophelia’s actions served the bloot king and, consequently, served regicide. His actions proceeding from good intentions frees him of culpability.

From the perspective of the Elizabethan audience, which still shares a desire for edification from its performers rather than participation, Hamlet has no more reason to berate himself or see weakness in his identity than Achilles does for sulking over Briseis while his comrades die in the field. In fact, where Hamlet does excoriate himself, it is for his own *inaction* rather than for hasty or misjudged action which has resulted misfortune for others. So too when Hamlet wishes to undo the insult caused to Laertes at his sister’s funeral. The prince acknowledges the incident as unfortunate and a source of some pain to him (“I am very sorry, good Horatio / That to Laertes I forgot myself”), and he will make some reparation (“I’ll court his favors”), but the most significant element is lacking: rather than accept culpability for a wrong, he attributes it to “the bravery of his grief” which put the prince “Into a towering passion” (5.2.75–80).

At stake is not just the possibility of Hamlet’s feelings about himself in relation to what he does, but more importantly, if Shakespeare deploys an epic structure intended for an Elizabethan audience’s passive Classical gaze, the bard would be astonished by the modern view of his prince as a narcissistic vacillator. Indeed, “ancient theorists seem to suggest that acting
with correct intentions and whatever knowledge could reasonably have been available will mean that the virtuous man need never feel any regrets.” This is not to say, however, that Hamlet does not learn from his actions when they have undesirable outcomes, simply that he does not perceive them as mistakes. They are to him lamentable consequences of the heroic action his epic frame requires of him.

II. Becoming Modern: New Heroes for a New Audience

The gradual emergence of a new type of audience at the beginning of the seventeenth century cannot be attributed to any single cause. Of course nostalgia, real and manufactured, for the familiarity of the Tudor dynasty is a component in its development, as well as the increasing sophistication and intimacy allowed by the indoor theaters. There is a change in dramaturgy too, as Aristotle steps out of the obscurity in which he existed during the fifteenth century and becomes more influential thanks to new Latin translations by Daniel Heinsius in 1610-11. The Heinsius editions rearranged the corrupt earlier versions of Poetics into a manual for playwrights. Aristotle’s Poetics was, in fact, first printed in Latin by Giorgio Valla in 1498 but received little attention from dramatists until Francesco Robortello’s republication with commentary 100 years later. Ideas from Poetics, such as hamartia and katharsis, however, had become absorbed into the already accepted dogma of Horace, but the new translations, parts of which were in circulation before their publication, allowed the principles of Aristotelian mimesis to compete with Horace’s imitatio in a meaningful way for the first time.\footnote{Ibid., 17.}

\footnote{Bruce R. Smith, \textit{Ancient Scripts and Modern Experience on the English Stage 1500–1700} (Princeton UP 1988)}
The influence of dramaturgy on the way character was presented to audiences is evident in *Hamlet*, for example, which follows the rules passed down from Horace to Kyd and Shakespeare by Donatus and similar interlocutors of the middle ages. Hamlet’s famous advice to the players, “Be not too tame neither, but let your own discretion be your tutor: suit the action to the word, the word to the action” (3.2.16–24) is the *imitatio* of Horace, articulated in *Ars Poetica*. First published in 1470, it would become the standard for stagecraft in the sixteenth century. In essence Horace’s *imitatio* treats drama as codification of Cicero’s various fragmentary comments on tragedy. Horace links Cicero’s belief that tragedy presents an argument to be judged by an audience to Quintilian’s insistence that rhetoric in life and on the stage must be yoked to moral philosophy, and packaged this way, *imitatio* held great appeal to Renaissance humanists looking for a rational means to truth. As Bruce R. Smith says in relation to fifteenth and sixteenth-century editions of Greek and Roman plays,

> Almost never are we allowed to approach the text by ourselves. First we must make our way through prefaratory treatises…. When we finally do reach the dramatic text, it is framed by running commentaries, ancient and modern, that often overwhelm the few lines of text that can be squeezed in on a folio page.”

Where the opportunity for participation is offered to the audience by the authors of characters like Hamlet, it is not the prince himself who is given over to the gaze for assessment but only the rights and wrongs of the argument which he presents. What the audience sees on the late sixteenth-century stage, then is the highly rhetorized construction of identity in the form of monologues, soliloquies, and speeches because, as Smith observes, “Horace never loses sight of the fact that a play consists of characters standing in front of an audience and speaking to them directly,” and thus neither do Kyd or Shakespeare.”

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8 Ibid., 29.
9 Ibid., 37.
Of the three features that late century tragedians absorb from Horace, the message, the linguistic style, and the character of the speaker, it is the last that undergoes the most obvious change through the challenge to *imitatio* by *mimesis*, the latter of which turns the focus of the audience gaze to character expressed through action rather than argument expressed through rhetoric. If *Caesar* presents the case for the psychological interior in the form of a Ciceronian forensic, it is partly because Shakespeare follows Horace’s use of *mos* [“will,” “inclination,” “conduct,” “morals”] to describe character, *mos* being “a word that replaces Aristotle’s sense of external acting with a strong sense of internal choosing.” Conversely, Webster’s *Duchess* abandons forensic rhetoric and psychology in favor of action and appearance. Thus the delight of characters like Vindice and Ferdinand in revealing who they are through spectacle and tableau becomes comprehensible in terms of a change in dramaturgical moves coincident with the social upheavals modifying early seventeenth-century perception of self. Yorick’s skull, for example, is stripped of its signification as a *memento mori* and returns to the utility of the stage prop when Vindice coats it with poison in the service of his revenge. By the time of *The Duchess of Malfi*, the poisoned skull has become the poisoned Bible, but the outcome remains the same. The props lose their meaning as contextual signifiers of argument, constructed rhetorically and presented theatrically, and become instead extensions of character.

This new focus on characters to be judged by actions, as opposed to rhetorical arguments or edifying heroic exemplars, challenges the Renaissance view of the world and the individual’s role within it. Where the homilies of the morality play offered the security of a providential god who rewards good choices and punishes bad ones, Seneca and his disciples offer no such platitudes: Hippolytus’s morally right choice does not prevent him from being ripped apart by a

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10 Ibid., 39.
sea monster; the Duchess of Malfi’s bravery does save her from torture and strangulation, and Edgar’s appeal to the gods goes unanswered. Boyle observes, “[t]he recurrent dramatisation of role-playing—in which characters become actors before other characters as audience: Phaedra before Theseus (Phaedra 864ff.), Medea before Jason (Medea 551ff.), Clytemnestra before Aegisthus (Agamemnon 239ff.), Atreus before Thyestes (Thyestes 491ff.)—underscores Senecan tragedy’s own conventions and artifice.”\(^{11}\) Now the gaze of the audience is forced to change because judging the ambiguous self with an agenda is a different experience from admiring the hero with an argument. The viewer must now see underneath the theatrical mask to judge the interior man, and this is the gaze facing Coriolanus.

Absent the corrective action of fate or providence, some semblance of containment over the whirlpool of chaos enveloping the characters can only be achieved by controlling the response of the audience itself. If the dramatist and characters onstage cannot look to a cosmic purpose presiding over the action, at least they can limit the reception of it by providing their own audience reactions. Kyd, therefore, does both. Rather than throw his protagonist out to an audience whose reception is unpredictable and whose expectations are out of his control, he suborns both by having Revenge and Don Andrea set the expectations and do the receiving. Revenge is always in control of the events and represents cosmic arbitration as well as an audience. The revolutionary element of Coriolanus is that Martius is denied a controlling providence, a rhetorical argument, or heroic largesse. Instead, Shakespeare throws him in front of an onstage audience with a gaze like our own, one that expects to see what is beneath the general’s theatrical mask. Of course Coriolanus does not recognize that he is wearing a mask in the first place, but when the power of the gaze forces him to look under it himself, thereby

\(^{11}\) A.J. Boyle, Tragic Seneca (Routledge, 1997) 114.
confirming that he is just a performer after all, he finds simply a “dull actor.” In this gesture Shakespeare seems to have given as definitive an answer to what the Renaissance identity is naming when it names itself as is to likely to be found.
Works


---. "What Is an Author?" Ibid.


____. *The Odyssey*. Ibid., 1996.


Progresses, Processions, and Magnificent Festivities of King James the First, His Royal Consort, Family and Court, Volume I. Edited by John Nichols, 4 vols. J. B. Nichols 1828. archive.org/details/progressesproce 01nichgoog.


---. The Arden Macbeth. Third Series. Edited by Kenneth Muir, 1985


