CHAPTER I

## *Shakespeare and the Resources of Senecan Tragedy*

> *"Quid ergo? Non intellegetur, cuius imiteris orationem, cuius argumen-*
> *tationem, cuius sententias?" Puto aliquando ne intellegi quidem posse, si*
> *imago vera sit; haec enim omnibus, quae ex quo velut exemplari traxit,*
> *formam suam inpressit, ut in unitatem illa conpetant.*
>
> "What," you say, "will it not be seen whose style you are imitating, whose
> method of reasoning, whose pungent sayings?" I think that sometimes it is
> impossible for it to be seen who is being imitated, if the copy is a true one;
> for a true copy stamps its own form upon all the features which it has drawn
> from what we may call the original, in such a way that they are combined
> into a unity. Seneca, *Moral Epistles*, 84.8–9
>
> Origin is an eddy in the stream of becoming, and in its current it
> swallows the material involved in the process of genesis.
>
> Walter Benjamin[1]

This book seeks to recover the ways that Shakespeare, in his tragedies, engaged
with the inherited resources of Senecan tragedy. It is a book, therefore, that
contributes to longstanding scholarly debates about the early modern recep-
tion of Seneca and about the relationship between Shakespearean drama and
its influences. But it is also a book that seeks to reflect upon the ways that these
longstanding scholarly questions accrue significance in relation to the
uniquely contested and ideologically overdetermined reception history of
Shakespeare himself. Because Shakespeare has for so long been construed as
the paradigmatic genius of modern letters, there can be no argument about
the intertextual genealogy of his plays that does not also have implications for
how we think about early modernity. This is a book about Shakespeare and
Seneca, but also one about how taking Seneca seriously as a resource unsettles
conventional wisdom about Shakespeare.

For much of the twentieth century, the importance of Senecan tragedy
for Shakespeare and his contemporaries was hotly contested. John
Cunliffe's flawed but influential 1893 study of *The Influence of Seneca on*

## 2 Shakespeare and the Resources of Senecan Tragedy

*Elizabethan Tragedy* was rightly criticized for claiming too much on the basis of parallel passages of dubious distinctiveness, and literary historians such as Howard Baker and G. K. Hunter argued forcefully that features of English drama once taken as proof of Senecan influence could instead have been derived from other sources.[2] Today, though, the importance of Seneca for Shakespeare and his contemporaries is more likely to be taken for granted than challenged. The most recent book-length overview of Shakespeare's classicism, Jonathan Bate's *How the Classics Made Shakespeare*, begins by noting that of course Shakespeare was deeply invested in Roman writers like "Cicero, Virgil, Ovid, Horace, and Seneca," even if certain aspects of Shakespeare's classical inheritance have been "curiously neglected" and so are still "hiding in plain sight."[3]

Acceptance of Senecan influence owes a great deal to scholars such as Gordon Braden and Robert Miola – whose work discredited the most dismissive older perspectives on Seneca's relationship to early modern drama – and also to the emergence of highly capacious models of intertextuality that have rendered obsolete the argumentative modes that prompted dismissiveness in the first place.[4] Debate over the importance of Seneca for Shakespeare once proceeded as if literary influence was a zero-sum game: Seneca or Greek tragedy? Seneca or medieval/folk drama? Seneca or Ovid? But it now seems obvious that the answer in each case should be both/and rather than either/or.[5] We now know, too, that though Seneca's plays were not part of the standard Elizabethan grammar school curriculum, they were performed at universities, imitated in Elizabethan neo-Latin drama, translated into English, and drawn upon in Elizabethan popular theater often enough to be mocked as cliché by Thomas Nashe near the beginning of Shakespeare's career.[6] "There is an overwhelmingly strong *prima facie* case that Shakespeare read and was influenced by Seneca," writes Colin Burrow: "he would have been mad not to have done so."[7]

This is *not* therefore a book organized around the need to demonstrate as if for the first time Seneca's relevance to Shakespeare or early modern drama. Nor does it attempt to offer a comprehensive resume of Senecan allusion in Shakespeare (though it adds to our store of such moments and to our understanding of how they operate).[8] It begins, rather, with the observation that our understanding of Shakespeare's engagement with Senecan tragedy has been distorted by centuries of critical disdain, and that even if Shakespeareans now readily acknowledge Seneca to be important for early modern tragedy, we remain unlikely to see his influence as an especially robust or interesting one. In the field of Classical Studies, by

contrast, Seneca's stock has been on the rise for decades – arguably since 1966, when C. J. Herington published a sizable and sympathetic overview essay to coincide with a reprinting of the 1927 facsimile edition of *Seneca His Tenne Tragedies*.[9] Certainly, the last two decades have seen an explosion of provocative work in Classics that has recast Seneca as a highly sophisticated and allusive writer capable of using tragedy to explore a wide range of questions concerning self-fashioning, literary form, and *Romanitas*.[10] Since Seneca's reputation among Shakespeareans remains mired in an older evaluative regime that saw his tragedies as static, bombastic, and (at best) somewhat embarrassing as a potential resource for the bard, Shakespeare studies can benefit from attending to the version of Senecan drama currently being rediscovered in Classics.

When I say that recovering Seneca unsettles conventional wisdom about Shakespeare and early modernity, I am referring first and foremost to a postromantic idea of Shakespeare as the poet laureate of modern personhood. I will have more to say about the role of romanticism in the reception histories of Seneca and Shakespeare later in this chapter, but as a starting point consider Coleridge, who celebrated as unique Shakespeare's ability to create characterological depth, and who saw that ability as going hand in hand with freedom from inherited conventions of dramatic form. In Shakespeare, Coleridge writes, "the interest in the plot is always in fact on account of the characters, not vice versa, as in almost all other writers; the plot is a mere canvas and no more."[11] Coleridge's idea of Shakespeare, which links freedom from form to distinctiveness of character, still reverberates loudly in contemporary criticism. Stephen Greenblatt, for instance, argued in 2010 that "Shakespeare as a writer is the embodiment of human freedom" and added that his intellectual freedom results in plays that explore "radical individuation – the singularity of the person who fails or refuses to match the dominant cultural expectation and is thus marked as irremediably different."[12] Peter Holbrook, who is explicit about wanting to champion a romantic-era idea of Shakespeare, makes the tradition's underlying claims more directly: "more than any other pre-Romantic writer, Shakespeare is committed to fundamentally modern values: freedom, individuality, self-realization, authenticity."[13] Historicist and posthumanist modes of criticism flourish in contemporary Shakespeare studies, of course, but the idea of Shakespeare as representatively modern in his approach to writing tragic character remains entrenched as part of the implicit common sense of the Shakespeare industry.

One of the key arguments that I will be making, explicitly in the first half of the book and implicitly thereafter, is that Shakespearean tragedy is often

indebted to Seneca where it seems most forward-looking in its exploration of radical individuation and its limits. I argue, in fact, that generative engagement with Seneca often lies behind precisely those aspects of Shakespearean tragedy that can now seem presciently modern, and I have come to believe that a habitual inattention to the resources of Senecan drama within Shakespeare studies has played an important, enabling role in the way Shakespeare has been constructed as our contemporary. Each of the book's first three body chapters – on *Richard III*, *Hamlet*, and *King Lear* respectively – is as concerned with the tradition of modern, theoretically inflected criticism in Shakespeare studies as with the philological work of classical reception, because each argues that canonical readings from modern Shakespeare criticism respond to what is Senecan in Shakespeare without knowing it. This is a book about the reception of Seneca, but also one that seeks to read several towering Shakespearean plays, *via* Seneca, against the grain of their own post-romantic reception histories.

In *How the Classics Made Shakespeare*, Bate suggests that "the process of self-shaping, self-knowledge, self-command and the relationship of that process to the will is . . . at the center of what the early modern period took from Seneca."[14] Recent work in Classics has also emphasized Seneca's innovative and influential perspectives on the self, both in his philosophical writing and in his tragedies.[15] Part of what I am doing in this book is connecting these dots, linking Shakespeare's supposedly epoch-making interest in radical individuation with aspects of Senecan tragedy that he drew upon and which might be said to explore the same thing. But Seneca's own interest in self-shaping and self-command, as Shadi Bartsch has explained, is inextricable from his historical situation in early-imperial Rome: the inward turn in his philosophical writing can be described as compensatory, a way to think about virtue after the collapse of a republican environment which had allowed for a more community-based sense of ethical duty.[16] And in Senecan tragedy, the project of radical individuation is often closely linked to willfully excessive *scelus* and moral monstrosity. "Heroic evil," as Braden has put it, is in Senecan tragedy "the ultimate autarceia, enforcing and exploiting a radical split between the self's needs and the claims of its context."[17] So while the post-romantic idea of Shakespeare sees radical individuation as modern, progressive, and potentially liberatory, the Senecan version is always fraught – it involves the loss of social coordinates and destructive moral isolation instead of a forward-looking emphasis on personal freedom.

Reading Shakespearean tragedies against the grain of their own post-romantic reception history, accordingly, sometimes entails recognizing that their versions of radical individuation imply Senecan thematics of social and/or political alienation. In some ways, this is obvious. Greenblatt's formulation about how radically individuated characters in Shakespeare fail or refuse "to match the dominant cultural expectation" clearly holds true for Richard III, Hamlet, and the Lear who flees into the storm, and in each case the resulting freedom involves a pervasive, uneasy sense that communal values have been jettisoned. In the second half of this book, however, I argue that political implications are in fact central to Shakespeare's sense of the resources of Senecan tragedy, and that his thinking about Seneca is productively entangled with his thinking about the exemplarity of Roman political history. Chapter 5 discusses Shakespeare's decision to give us a psychologically absolutist Senecan protagonist in *Coriolanus*, a play that dramatizes a key moment of institutional development in the early Roman Republic. I argue that the play endows its hero with an imperial, Senecan style of inner life in order to express a skeptical early-Jacobean view of Roman republicanism. In Chapter 6, I link the resources of Senecan tragedy to *Titus Andronicus* and to ideas about global empire that are also located specifically in post-republican Rome. I argue, too, that Senecan inwardness gets repurposed as part of a vocabulary of racial stereotype on the Elizabethan stage because of its association with imperial Roman deracination. In Chapter 7, I read *Othello* as a dramatization of the failure of a mode of Ciceronian decorum that is located, initially, in the republican milieu of Venice. Each of these plays is thinking about political ideas associated with Rome, I argue, and each locates Senecan-style characters against the backdrop of the failure of republican community.

Shakespeare and his contemporaries were fascinated by the story of the collapse of the Republic and the rise of the Principate. As Freyja Cox Jensen notes, this is "the period of Roman history with which early modern commentators engaged most frequently and sustainedly."[18] Shakespeare's theatrical imagination was captured by this story in part because the change in political environment brought attendant changes to modes of self-performance. In some ways, these statements about Shakespeare's Rome overlap with territory covered in Patrick Gray's ambitious recent book on *Shakespeare and Fall of the Roman Republic*, and so it may be clarifying here to distinguish my own line of argument from his.[19] Gray argues that Shakespeare saw the collapse of the Republic as an indictment of *Romanitas*, and that in his Plutarchan tragedies Shakespeare specifically

advocates for anti-Roman modes of personhood associated with Augustinian Christianity. Rome, in Gray's argument, is always about *libido dominandi*, and it is therefore associated with a style of self that is individualistic, competitive, and potentially antisocial. In a separate but related essay, Gray makes it clear that he sees Seneca as a representative spokesman for this version of Rome, both because his philosophical stoicism advocates for imperviousness and because of the power-hungry violence staged in his tragedies.[20]

Underpinning Gray's book is a large-scale narrative history of the self, one that is arrived at in conversation with the work of scholars such as Charles Taylor and Timothy J. Reiss.[21] The coming of modern individualism, the story goes, involves the separation of the self from forms of affiliation and belonging that had previously been understood as integral to identity. The characteristic Roman desire for dominion or invulnerability, in Gray's argument, is thus a kind of seedling or precursor for modernity: it informs later neostoicism and other modes of self-fashioning constitutive of "the new individualism" of the early modern period; and early modern individualism in turn feeds into the fully fledged development of modern individualism in the romantic era and beyond.[22] Shakespeare, in criticizing Rome, is thus also seen as implicitly critical of modern individualism and of literary criticism in the romantic tradition that values it. Gray's Shakespeare "more closely resembles critics of Romanticism and modernity ... than he does the German and British Romantics who cemented his fame and who strive to claim him as one of their own."[23]

I see Shakespeare's interest in Seneca and Rome as dialogic and interrogatory in nature, rather than as uniformly critical.[24] Part of what makes Seneca interesting as an antecedent for Shakespeare is the fact that his *premodern* emphasis on radical individuation fits awkwardly within periodizing histories of the self. And as for Rome, it strikes me that the Roman transformation from Republic to Principate is already in some ways a microcosm for the development of modernity in a narrative like Gray's – in that it entails a shift towards privatized ethical individualism from a Ciceronian notion of identity emphasizing decorum grounded in reciprocally reinforced communal ethics. Gray's Shakespeare sees Seneca as a mouthpiece for an individualistic *Romanitas* that is exposed by the fall of the Republic; mine, instead, associates Senecan drama's radical modes of individuation with the loss of social coordinates in post-republican Rome. As Geoffrey Miles has shown, Shakespeare's Plutarchan plays contrast a Ciceronian style of public-minded decorum with a Senecan brand of stoic constancy that

is more fundamentally antisocial and self-protective in nature – I think his emphasis on the contrast between Ciceronian and Senecan modes of *Romanitas* gets at something important about how Shakespeare understood both Seneca and Rome.[25] What if Shakespeare seems proleptically critical of individualistic modernity because he is thinking with Seneca about the loss of republican community in Rome? The first half of this book looks at how Shakespeare uses the representational/characterological resources of Senecan tragedy and at how they have helped make Shakespeare seem modern to modern critics. The second half of the book examines the way Shakespearean tragedy thematizes the politics of radical individuation in relation to a political vocabulary grounded in Rome's pervasive historical exemplarity.

Alain Gowing, writing about Seneca's philosophical prose, observes that "Seneca is the first imperial writer to concede *explicitly* that the Augustan Principate marked a real change in the character of the *res publica*."[26] One starting place for thinking about the relationship between Senecan inwardness and its imperial political environment might be Matthew Roller's 2001 book *Constructing Autocracy*, which mined the work of writers including Lucan and Seneca (the philosopher) to examine how aristocratic Romans renegotiated their ethical and civic commitments after the transformation from Republic to Principate.[27] Roller argued that Seneca's philosophical writings redirect older Roman ideas of virtuous exemplarity away from codes of military honor and towards inward mental states as a way to rethink aristocratic identity in light of the curtailment of opportunities for military self-advancement under the Principate.[28] In making this style of argument concerning the pragmatic instrumentality of early-imperial writing, Roller lends socio-political precision to the more general idea – associated with Foucault – that the imperial era represents "a . . . golden age in the representation of the self."[29]

But it is one thing to recognize that Seneca's philosophical writings react to the changing political landscape of imperial Rome and another to figure out how such analysis might extend to Seneca's plays. And this is why I have found Bartsch's 2006 book *The Mirror of the Self* especially indispensable. Bartsch describes a transformation in the specular assumptions organizing Roman identity and locates in Seneca's writings across genres an imperial-era recasting of a republican ethos in which elite identity was construed in public terms and confirmed by mutual, reciprocal approbation among men. Building on Roller's position, and on Foucault's, Bartsch finds in Seneca "a new and more reflexive concept of the self," one that replaces public codes of virtue with "self-dialogue" and one that "derives its

normative values directly from the tenets of Stoic philosophy rather than from the judgements of . . . peers."[30]

Bartsch draws upon Christopher Gill's terminology to make this comparison, and I will do so as well. Republican-era Roman writers, in keeping with earlier philosophical traditions, imagine the ethical self in "objective-participant" terms. An ethical life is thus understood to be "expressed in whole-hearted engagement with an interpersonal and communal role and in debate about the proper form that such a role should take. The ultimate outcome of these two types of participation is both (a) objective knowledge of what constitutes the best human life and (b) a corresponding character and way of life."[31] In contrast, Gill describes a pervasive, modern "subjective-individualist" idea of the self, heralded by Cartesian subjectivity and Kantian ethics, in which judgment is located in a self understood to represent a unique and unified locus of thought.[32] For Bartsch, Seneca falls between these two regimes, such that the self articulated in Seneca's philosophical writings is, rather, "objective individualist," a category that Gill does not think possible for the classical world: it is "a comparatively isolated self not predominantly embedded in the values of its community but nonetheless believing that its own values are objectively true."[33]

Bartsch also locates a crucial parallelism between the stoic self conjured via recursive self-dialogue in Seneca's philosophical writings and the criminal anti-heroes for which his plays are famous: the moral solipsism of Senecan characters can be seen as a parodic version of the objective-individualist stoic sage.[34] Christopher Star, building on Bartsch's insights, has argued that the experience of empire structures the Roman self in the age of Seneca, and that this is expressed in an "ideal of self-command (*sibi imperare*)" that is represented in Seneca's philosophical writings by the stoic sage and in his tragedies by antiheroes like Medea and Atreus.[35] He thus reads Atreus' famous, self-hectoring opening monologue in *Thyestes* (lines 176–204) as "a study in the process of self-transformation via self-directed commands."[36] There is a very suggestive affinity, therefore, between the picture that emerges of Senecan tragedy's imperial mode of characterization and the way self-fashioning has been discussed since the 1980s as a touchstone for early modernity (as epitomized by Shakespeare).[37] In each case, the new, inward-oriented self is constructed – and its autonomy asserted – in some kind of partial opposition to totalizing power (the emperor, the centralizing state), and in each case the boundedness of the self is understood as at least potentially nostalgic in relation to an earlier moment of putative cohesive communality (republican or medieval).[38] Thus, I would argue, Seneca helps make Shakespeare seem

like our contemporary *both* because his plays offer modern-seeming theo-rizations of radical individuation *and* because they do so in relation to a Roman moment that involves a modern-seeming set of concerns about the relationship of the individual to political community.

## Two Senecas or One?

Scholars interested in Senecan drama have always been interested in the question of how to square the intellectual project of the plays with the tenets of Seneca's philosophical works.[39] I am interested in that, too. The two oeuvres have distinct histories of transmission, and it is important to remember that the two Senecas – the philosopher and the tragedian – were not always assumed to be the same person in medieval and early modern Europe.[40] This confusion originated with Boccaccio's miscon-struction of an epigram by Martial (1.61). Where Martial writes of two Senecas – meaning our author and his father – Boccaccio understood him to mean that the philosopher and the tragedian were different people.[41] The resulting confusion percolated through international humanist circles, with the result that there are writers in early modern England who seem to have thought of Seneca *Tragicus* as a different person than Seneca the well-known classical philosopher and advisor to Nero.[42] The English translation of Justus Lipsius' *Sixe Bookes of the Politickes or Civil Doctrine* (1594), for instance, distinguishes between Annaeus Seneca and Seneca *Tragicus* in its list of cited authorities. It is likewise possible that Sir William Cornwallis's *Discourses Upon Seneca the Tragedian* (1601), which consists of a series of essays riffing on *sententiae* from Senecan tragedy, is so named to distin-guish its subject from Seneca the Philosopher, upon whom Cornwallis had drawn heavily in his *Essayes* (1600). It is also possible, however, to find early modern writers who obviously do think of the two Senecas as the same person, such as Richard Rainolde, who in his *Foundation of Rhetoric* (1563) praises "Seneca, the famous Poete & Philosopher."[43]

In this book I assume that the two oeuvres are the products of the same person and write as if they were understood by Shakespeare to be the product of the same writer as well. Having examined the instances where English writers seem to treat Seneca and Seneca *Tragicus* as different people, I find that Senecan tragedy was always understood in Elizabethan England to have a special relationship to Seneca's philosophical writing: the distinction blurs even in cases where there is explicit evidence of belief in two separate Senecas. Take the case of Thomas Lodge (later the trans-lator of the first complete English edition of Seneca's philosophical works),

who wrote in 1579 that "Seneca, though a stoic, would have a poetical son."[44] In Lodge's 1596 treatise *Wits Miserie* one finds illustrative examples drawn from Seneca's philosophical and dramatic writing almost adjacent to one another and without any indication that the Senecas named are not the same person: "weigh this one example of *Seneca* written in his fourth booke *De Beneficiis* ... which according to *Seneca* in *Oedipus* ... "[45] Perhaps Lodge changed his mind between 1579 and 1596, or perhaps this is evidence that the two Senecas tended to be lumped together even by writers who thought they were separate people. Though the English translation of Lipsius' *Six Bookes* distinguishes between the two Senecas in its paratextual apparatus, it is inconsistent in its marginal citations and only rarely indicates that a quotation from the plays is from Seneca *Tragicus* instead of just Seneca.[46]

The English translators of Senecan tragedy certainly seem to have considered their author to be one and the same with the philosopher, and their descriptions of him as "the prudent and sage Seneca" or as "the most grave, vertuous & Christian ethenicke ... Seneca" would be incoherent without reference to the interpretive traditions involved in the reception of his philosophical writings.[47] In general, the reception of Senecan tragedy in England shows traces of an association both with the philosophical writings of Seneca and with his Roman political career. Thus, as James Ker points out, Thomas Nashe's famous mockery of imitative Senecanism in Elizabethan tragedy is also an allusion to the Roman Seneca's forced suicide, in which he is supposed to have slit his wrists only to find the resulting blood flow too slow to do the trick:

> English *Seneca* read by candle light yeeldes manie good sentences, as *Bloud is a beggar*, and so foorth: and if you intreate him faire in a frostie morning, he will affoord you whole *Hamlets*, I should say handfulls of tragical speaches. But ô grief! *tempus edax rerum*, what's that will last alwaies? The sea exhaled by droppes will in continuance be drie, and *Seneca* let bloud line by line and page by page, at length must needes die to our stage.[48]

The bloodiness of Senecan tragedy is here explicitly cross-referenced with Seneca's Roman political career, which again indicates how routine such an association could be within the context of the reception of Senecan tragedy. A similar habit of association underpins the juxtaposition of stoicism and Senecan revenge plotting in plays such as *Hamlet*, John Marston's *Antonio's Revenge* (1602), and George Chapman's *Revenge of Bussy D'Ambois* (1611–1612).[49] Senecan revenge tragedy evidently conjured Senecan stoicism in the minds of playwrights.