

ABSTRACT

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"Untir'd Spirits and Formal Constancy":
Shakespeare's Roman Plays and the Stoic Tradition

Critics who have noted the importance of Stoic constancy in Shakespeare's Roman plays have failed to recognise the full complexity of the idea. It has two forms, both derived from the Stoic principle of homologia (consistency), and centred on the ideal of being always the same: Seneca's constantia sapientis, the rocklike or godlike virtue of the Stoic sage who is unmoved and unchanged by external circumstances; and Cicero's decorum (De officiis I), virtue as the consistent playing of an appropriate part. Seneca is more concerned with heroic self-sufficiency, Cicero with social virtue, but both forms of the ideal contain a tension between concern for inner truth and external appearances.

In the late sixteenth century Stoic constancy becomes a subject of fierce debate as it is revived by the Neostoics, who stress the opposition of constancy and "opinion." Shakespeare's view of this debate may derive particularly from Montaigne, who moves from a Neostoic position to a sceptical critique of constancy as unattainable by inconstant man, and as less desirable than self-knowledge and flexibility.

Reading North's Plutarch with these themes in mind, Shakespeare sees

in the lives of Brutus, Antony, and Coriolanus an Aristotelian pattern of ideal, defective, and excessive constancy - a pattern which he modifies, in the light of his understanding of Seneca, Cicero, and Montaigne, in the three Roman plays. He explores the tension which exists between the Senecan and Ciceronian forms of constancy, and indeed within each of them: a tension between heroic Stoic virtue ("untir'd spirits") and public role-playing ("formal constancy"). Julius Caesar shows Roman constancy as essentially "formal," resting on pretence and self-deception; in Rome, ironically, constancy depends on "opinion." Coriolanus, by taking constancy to an extreme, demonstrates the self-destructive contradictions within it. Antony and Cleopatra, by contrast, embrace a Montaigne-like ideal of "infinite variety" and inconsistent decorum; Antony fails, but Cleopatra achieves in death a paradoxical fusion of constancy and mutability.

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Stoic Tradition**

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PREFATORY NOTE

For convenience of reference, this thesis is divided into two volumes, the first containing the text, the second notes and bibliography. I follow the conventions set out in the MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers, Theses, and Dissertations (1st edn, New York, 1977), as modified by Oxford practice.

In quoting from old-spelling texts I have silently normalised i/j, u/v, and long s, and expanded contractions; in dramatic texts I have expanded speech prefixes.

Titles of journals are abbreviated according to the forms used by the annual MLA International Bibliography; for other abbreviations, including titles of Shakespeare's plays, I follow the MLA Handbook, secs 45-49. Abbreviated titles of works by Seneca and Cicero are listed in Chapter 2, n. 8, and Chapter 3, n. 1, respectively. In bibliographical citations, names of publishers are omitted, and place of publication is London unless otherwise noted.

I should like to express my thanks to my two supervisors, Dr John Wilders at Oxford and Professor Alistair Fox at Otago, and to Dr Miriam T. Griffin, who kindly read and commented on early drafts of Chapters 3 and 4.

This thesis is dedicated to the memory of my father.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

When Brutus tells his fellow-conspirators to "bear it as our Roman actors do, / With untir'd spirits and formal constancy," he is alluding to what was for Shakespeare one of the central concepts of Roman ethics.¹ In this thesis I shall examine the concept of "constancy": its dual source in the Roman Stoicism of Seneca and of Cicero, its controversial status in the Renaissance debates of Neostoics and anti-Stoics, and Shakespeare's development of it as a central theme in his three Roman plays.²

[1] The critical background

It is only in the last two decades that critics have begun to approach the Roman plays in this way: as a group of plays defined by their Roman setting, and primarily concerned with Rome and the Roman ethos.³ Before the late 1960s only four books in this century had dealt with the Roman plays as a group: M. W. MacCallum's Bradleyan study of 1910, still the most comprehensive and perhaps still the standard work; G. Wilson Knight's (1931) and Maurice Charney's (1961) studies of imagery; and Derek Traversi's painstaking scene-by-scene account (1963).⁴ More often the plays were approached individually, or as members of the larger set of Shakespeare's tragedies. So approached, they have often been found

problematic, or inferior to the "great tragedies." They seem as close to the histories as to the other tragedies in their focus on the fate of a society as much as of an individual; Antony and Cleopatra even contains a disconcertingly large element of comedy. As tragedies, they can seem unsatisfactory: their heroes lacking full tragic stature, appearing stiff or hollow, preoccupied with public appearances, failing to achieve tragic self-knowledge; the plays lacking a metaphysical dimension, limited to the public political world, arousing intellectual interest rather than tragic pity and terror.⁵ Moreover, each of them has raised acute problems of interpretation: critics have divided into violently opposed camps over Shakespeare's implied judgements of Caesar and his murder, of the love (or lust) of Antony and Cleopatra, of Coriolanus as hero (or anti-hero).⁶ Only the so-called "problem plays," perhaps, have evoked from critics such conflicting interpretations and such a failure to agree on the most basic moral premises.

Since the late 1950s it has been increasingly accepted that this problematic quality is deliberate: that the Roman plays are themselves "problem plays" in which Shakespeare induces in his audience "uncertain and divided responses" (Ernest Schanzer) so as to make them experience the complexity of moral, political, and historical judgement; that Antony and Cleopatra is among other things "Shakespeare's critique of judgement" (John F. Danby), and that epistemological questions of knowledge, judgement, and error are central to the meaning of all three plays.⁷

A more recent, and in my view complementary, critical trend is to stress the Romanness of the Roman plays. A forerunner of this trend was T. J. B. Spencer, who argued in 1957 that Shakespeare was seriously concerned with recreating ancient Rome, "producing a mimesis of the veritable history of the most important people (humanly speaking) who ever lived."⁸ The comprehensive study of Elizabethan views of Rome which

Spencer urged has not yet appeared, but his insistence that Rome is not merely the setting but the subject of the Roman plays, and that part of Shakespeare's purpose was the exploration of an ancient and alien culture, has been influential. This approach is taken by the most recent book-length studies, by J. L. Simmons (1973), Paul A. Cantor (1976), Michael Platt (1976), and Robert S. Miola (1983); it also influences Judah A. Stampfer's study of the "classical tragedies" (1968).⁹ The first four take very different views of Rome: Simmons (in an Augustinian view) stressing the pre-Christian setting, and the "mutually defining, paradoxical relationship" between pagan Rome and its heroes; Cantor, the changing nature of Roman politics, and hence of "Romanness," from republic to empire; Platt, the determining influence of Rome on the Romans, who are "citizens" rather than "men"; Miola, the diversity of Rome and of Renaissance views of it, and Shakespeare's use of the city as "a palpable though ever-changing presence."¹⁰ All agree, however, on its central importance in the plays, and use it to explain some of their problematic qualities. The plays cannot be explained in terms of Elizabethan moral and political orthodoxies because Shakespeare is consciously dealing with an alien ethos; the public quality of the action and the externality of the portrayal of the protagonists reflect the public nature of Roman society, in which humanity and self-knowledge are underrated, and tragedy is a matter of "loss of role"; the morally problematic quality of the plays may be seen as resulting from a secular world which lacks moral absolutes and judges on the basis of public opinion and honour.¹¹ Simmons in particular, though his dogmatic Christianising can be heavy-handed, diagnoses a central conflict and paradox in the plays: between the constricted, purely secular and political world of Rome, and the impossible perfection and transcendence to which it drives its heroes to aspire. The conflict explored in this thesis between Senecan and Ciceronian

constancy, between "untir'd spirits and formal constancy," may be seen as an aspect of Simmons's dichotomy.

The theme of Stoic constancy was first discussed by several American critics writing on Julius Caesar in the 1960s and 1970s: Phyllis Rackin, John Anson, R. J. Kaufmann and Clifford J. Ronan, Ruth M. Levitsky, and Marvin L. Vawter.¹² They saw Brutus, and to a lesser degree Caesar and others, practising the kind of Stoic virtue and "constancy" preached by classical Stoics such as Seneca and revived by the Neostoic movement in the late sixteenth century. Most saw Shakespeare as strongly critical of the ideal, condemning the inhumanity of its suppression of emotion and the arrogance of its claim to invulnerability and godlike superiority.

"Constancy" is indeed, I believe, central to Shakespeare's conception of Romanness and Roman virtue, not only in Julius Caesar but also in Antony and Cleopatra and Coriolanus, in which the influence of Stoicism is much less obvious. In this thesis I propose to follow the line of approach explored by these earlier critics, but to extend it to the other two Roman plays, and also to modify their interpretation both of Shakespeare's view of constancy and of the tradition - or traditions - on which he was drawing.

In the first place, these critics (with the notable exception of Kaufmann and Ronan) have tended to take a strongly moralising anti-Stoic position, seeing Brutus and Caesar as rendered inhuman, destructive, or even insane by their Stoic principles. Such views are extreme and oversimplified, ignoring the extent to which we are able to admire or sympathise with the Stoic aspirations of the characters, and also the extent to which they are humanised by their failure to live up to the full Stoic ideal. These critics have similarly oversimplified the tradition on which Shakespeare drew. Tracing an "anti-Stoic tradition" which they assume to have been orthodox in Shakespeare's time, they ignore the

ambivalence which has always marked Christian attitudes to Stoicism; citing writers such as Cicero, Erasmus, and Montaigne simply as critics of Stoicism, they ignore the complexities and contradictions in their attitudes. While I agree, for example, with Vawter that Shakespeare's attitude to Stoic constancy is very close to Montaigne's, I hope to demonstrate, with a detailed analysis of Montaigne's "divers, and wavering" treatment of the idea, that the attitudes of both are more
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 complex than he acknowledges.

Most significantly, I wish to propose an alternative source, in addition to the Senecan and Neostoic tradition discussed by earlier critics, for Shakespeare's concept of Roman constancy: the idea of decorum expounded by Cicero in De officiis, Book I. Surprisingly, in view of the immense popularity of "Tully's Offices" as an Elizabethan schoolbook and moral authority, no critic has seen the full relevance of these passages
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 to Shakespeare's Roman plays. It is, in my view, Shakespeare's sense of the complex relationship between the ideals of Senecan constancy and Ciceronian decorum, and of the potential contradiction between them as well as within each of them, that lies behind many of the moral conflicts and paradoxes of the Roman plays.

Finally, although critics have discussed the concern of the plays with epistemological problems, and the relationship of these problems to the Roman concern with honour, they have failed to perceive the central ironic relationship between this theme and that of constancy. In Stoic and especially in Neostoic thought, the virtue of constancy is insistently opposed to the vice of "opinion" - false beliefs and concern for the opinions of others. Shakespeare shows, throughout the Roman plays, that the Roman ideal of constancy is inextricably entangled with the flaw which makes it unattainable.

I do not intend to argue that constancy is the theme of the Roman

plays; it is merely one figure in a very complex carpet. It is, however, a figure which connects significantly with a number of other important motifs - public and private life, role-playing and identity, knowledge and opinion, honour, Romanness, classical and Christian ideas of virtue - and so may take us close to Shakespeare's central concerns in these plays.

[2] Constancy

The English word "constancy" derives, by way of constantia, from Latin constare (to stand firm). Its basic sense is "not moving, remaining fixed," and hence "not changing, remaining the same." Used as a description of a moral quality, it has two senses which are often hard to distinguish.

The first is "The state or quality of being unmoved in mind; steadfastness, firmness, endurance, fortitude" (OED, "Constancy" 1). In this sense constancy is linked with courage and endurance, and implies remaining unmoved under pressure, internal or external; the constant person is unshaken by passion or fear, and maintains his fixed resolves despite pressures to change or submit. I shall distinguish this sense, where necessary, as "constancy (steadfastness)."¹⁵

The second is "The quality of being invariable...; uniformity, unchangingness, regularity" (OED, "Constancy" 3), the opposite of mutability. Though OED refers this sense only to abstract or inanimate subjects (such as "the laws of God" or geometrical angles), it can also be applied to a mental state or, metaphorically, to a person, as when Caesar describes himself as "constant as the northern star." In this sense it is close to "consistency" (with which it is etymologically linked).¹⁶ The constant person, in this sense, is self-consistent, always the same,

uniform and unvarying in his beliefs, principles, feelings, and way of life. I shall refer to this sense as "constancy (consistency)."

Though these senses can be theoretically distinguished, in practice they are so intertwined that the one usually implies the other. When Caesar calls himself "constant" he refers primarily to his self-consistency, but also implies that he will not give way under pressure. When Brutus (in the passage quoted earlier) urges his friends to show "formal constancy," does he mean "steadfastness in the face of danger" or "consistency in playing a part"? Surely both ideas are present, and, as I shall argue later, the ambiguity is a crucial one.¹⁷

The words "constant" and "constance" (later "constancy") entered English in the fourteenth century. In Chaucer's "Clerk's Tale" we find them already used as a leitmotif in all three senses: fidelity,¹⁸ steadfastness, and consistency. In the Renaissance, with the revival of classical philosophy, "constancy" came to be more explicitly associated with the moral ideals of Stoicism, especially in the later sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, which it was taken up as a keyword of the Neostoic movement. "Constancy" became a word which summed up Stoic and Roman virtue.¹⁹ In translations of classical works, such as Thomas North's version of Plutarch's Lives and Thomas Lodge's of Seneca's prose works, "constancy" and "constant" are used to translate a variety of ethical terms.²⁰

What is the origin of the idea of constancy as a virtue, and how does it become identified as central to Stoic ethics?

Like so many ideas in European philosophy, this one seems to derive from Plato, one of whose basic axioms was (in Karl Popper's formulation)²¹ "that change is evil, and that rest is divine." This assumption rests upon Plato's distinction between the world of Being, the unchanging realm of the forms and the gods or God, and the mortal world of Becoming, which

is governed by movement and change, growth and decay. The distinction corresponds to that between the human soul and body: "The soul is most like that which is divine, immortal, intelligible, uniform, indissoluble, and ever self-consistent and invariable, while the body is most like that which is human, mortal, multiform, unintelligible, dissoluble, and never self-consistent."²² This Platonic dichotomy - God, the soul, constancy and perfection, versus the mundane world, the body, mutability and imperfection - is one of the most influential in western thought. From it follows logically the ethical assumption that to become more perfect, more like the gods, human beings must become constant, unchanging and self-consistent. On the level of practical ethics, as the Republic makes clear, this means that each person should "persist unswervingly in the pursuit of [his] single natural bent," playing a single social role with unvarying consistency - a definition of virtue which we will encounter again in Cicero.²³

The Stoics take over from Plato, along with much else, the axiom that rest is better than change. They approach the idea of constancy, however,²⁴ by way of a rather different set of assumptions. One of the most fundamental Stoic ideas is homologia: harmony, regularity, consistency. Zeno, the founder of Stoicism, defined the aim of the philosopher as to live homologoumenos, harmoniously or consistently; his successor Chrysippus expanded the definition to homologoumenos tei physei,²⁵ consistently with nature. Implied in this formula is the Stoic view of the universe as a perfectly harmonious, ordered, unified whole, animated and guided by a power which can be called, more or less synonymously,²⁶ Reason (logos) or Nature or God. Our human reason is an aspect or reflection of the cosmic Reason (right reason) which governs the universe, a spark from the divine fire. The philosopher is the person whose reason is perfectly in tune with right reason, and who willingly submits to it,

becoming a harmonious part of the grand design. Such a harmony or consistency inevitably involves internal harmony and self-consistency. As R. D. Hicks puts it, the Stoic end is "a life consistent and harmonious, the smooth flow of existence unchecked by eddies and cross-currents."

To Zeno ... the first mark of reason was self-consistency. A rational life must follow a single harmonious plan, whereas the paths of folly are many and various, but always stamped with inconsistency and contradiction.²⁷

This seems to be implied in Zeno's original, cryptic formula: since reason is inherently consistent and unreason inconsistent, to live consistently (homologoumenos) necessarily implies consistency with right reason and nature, and hence a life of wisdom and virtue.²⁸ The Stoics' assumptions thus lead them to the Platonic ideal of being always the same and unchanging.

To see how this concept of consistency develops into the rather different concept normally thought of as "Stoic constancy," we must look in more detail at the Stoic ethical system, and first at the theory of knowledge on which it rests.²⁹ The Stoics, like Plato, draw a sharp distinction between true knowledge and mere belief or opinion, and identify knowledge with virtue: a person who knows what is good will necessarily act rightly. Virtue depends upon making correct judgements. Hence the Stoics normally speak not of "good" and "bad" men, but of "wise" and "foolish" ones. The Stoic moral ideal is the wise man or sage, the man whose reason is completely in tune with right reason. The wise man makes consistently correct judgements, and is incapable of error; hence,³⁰ he is morally perfect.

The basis of the wise man's wisdom is the knowledge that nothing is "good" except what is morally good (that is, life in harmony with nature), and nothing "bad" except what is morally evil. All other things which in common language are called "good" (health, wealth, beauty, power, fame,

friendship, and so on) or "bad" (sickness, poverty, disgrace, and so on) are in fact "indifferent" - morally neutral, neither to be desired nor feared by the wise man. It is true that some of these indifferent matters can be classed as "preferred" and others as "rejected": all other things being equal, in most circumstances, the wise man will prefer to be healthy than sick, prosperous than poor, and so on, and will attempt to arrange his life accordingly. Ordinary, day-to-day virtue - the performing of "appropriate acts," in Stoic terminology - consists of the correct selection and pursuit of such "preferable" objects. But the wise man will not allow himself to care about his success or failure in such aims. He remains indifferent to everything which is outside his own mind or soul and hence outside his control, and cares only about the one thing which is within his control: his own moral state. Even life and death are not good or bad in themselves: in most circumstances to remain alive will be the preferred option, but the wise man will face death, or even commit suicide if this seems an appropriate act, with undisturbed equanimity.

Virtue is thus identified with knowledge of what is good, and vice, correspondingly, with false judgements and opinions. In the words of Epictetus, "What disturbs men's minds is not events but their judgements
³¹ on events." When a person accepts the false opinion that something indifferent is good or bad (for instance, that money is desirable, or that death is fearful), that opinion produces an emotional reaction of desire or fear when he is faced with the thing in question. The Stoics thus reject the traditional division of the mind into two faculties labelled "reason" and "passion," competing for mastery. The mind is, in essence, wholly rational, but it may act in accordance with right reason, or be swayed by false opinions into undesirable emotional states. When these states become ingrained they are called "passions," which are diseases of the mind, and cause a kind of insanity. Such passions must be not merely

controlled but completely eradicated. The wise man, whose reason is in complete harmony with right reason, lives in a state of complete freedom from passion (apatheia). This is not, as later anti-Stoics assumed and as the English associations of "apathy" would suggest, a state of total emotionlessness. The wise man has no passions, but he has moderate and rational feelings (happiness, benevolence, caution) known as eupathai ("good emotional states" - a word translated by Cicero as constantiae,
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 "stable or constant states"). "The Stoics distinguished good men from
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 others by reference to the consistency of their logos [reason]."

Whereas most people act sometimes rationally and sometimes irrationally, the wise man is consistently governed by right reason. His state of mind is characterised above all by stability, regularity, harmony, constancy (consistency).

Stoic ethical doctrine, in its original form, is not as inhumanly extreme as later anti-Stoic critics suggest. Stoic teachers often formulated it, however, in "paradoxes" which put the concept of the wise man in its most extreme, controversial, and apparently absurd form: that only the wise man is rich (because he has virtue, the only possession that matters), that only the wise man is a king (because he has absolute sovereignty over himself), that the wise man will be happy even while being tortured on the rack (because no physical suffering can disturb the happiness that comes from virtue). Such paradoxes provocatively express the Stoic sense of an absolute disjunction between external events and internal states of mind. Once a man has attained Stoic wisdom, nothing that happens to him, however "bad" (or for that matter however "good"), can disturb his absolute tranquillity and equanimity. He cannot be deterred from virtue by any threats, since he knows that death and pain are not to be feared. The idea of the wise man's consistency of logos, his maintenance of the same mental attitudes and feelings, thus turns into

a celebration of the defensive strength of the mind, unshaken and unchanged by external adversity. Constancy (consistency) merges into constancy (steadfastness).

This side of Stoic ethics was emphasised by the Roman Stoic writers: Seneca, Epictetus, Marcus Aurelius, Cicero in his Stoic moments. These writers largely ignored logic, physics and metaphysics, and the stricter technicalities of Stoic ethics, to concentrate on practical moral advice and exhortation. In some ways, following later Stoic thinkers like Panaetius and Posidonius, they softened the austerity of the ancient Stoa, putting less emphasis on the sage and more on ordinary people in everyday life.³⁴ In other ways, responding to the needs of the Roman aristocratic class in the political turmoil of the early Empire, they laid more stress on exhortations to fortitude and resolution in the face of adversity. It is this form of Stoicism, "first and last a practical moral doctrine" (A. A. Long), which has had most influence on later centuries. In the words of Herschel Baker, "Stoicism has always exerted its profoundest influence as an attitude rather than a philosophic system" - an attitude of patient endurance, absence of passion, indifference to externals. This view of Stoicism, as Long points out, is reflected in the popular use not only of the words "stoic" and "stoical," but also of the word "philosophical" to imply the patient bearing of trouble.³⁵ This is, indeed, the way Shakespeare uses the word. When Romeo rejects the Friar's proffer of "Adversity's sweet milk, philosophy" with the cry "Hang up philosophy," or when Leonato dismisses philosophers who cannot endure the toothache patiently,

However they have writ the style of gods,
And made a push at chance and sufferance,

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it is primarily Stoic philosophy that is in question.

The most important writers in transmitting Stoicism to later

generations are Seneca and Cicero, whose versions of Stoic virtue stress respectively the qualities of constancy (steadfastness) and constancy (consistency).

Seneca is the writer most closely identified with the Stoic ideal and the concept of Stoic constancy. In letters and essays such as De constantia sapientis, he portrays with moral fervour and rhetorical gusto the ideal of the sapiens, the wise man, and his constancy. For Seneca, constantia implies strength and stability of mind, unmoved by passions, unshaken by disaster, impervious to any external force, always the same whatever the external circumstances (unus idemque inter diversa). His sapiens, portrayed with a mixture of passive resignation and hubristic pride, combines the imperviousness of a rock with the serene detachment of a god. This ideal of constancy, though repeatedly attacked by later Christians as arrogant and inhuman, was revived in the Renaissance to become the cornerstone of Neostoicism.

Cicero (not a dogmatic Stoic but an eclectic sceptic strongly influenced by Stoicism) wove together Stoic ethics and Roman traditions to create the classic account of Roman virtue. In his enormously influential De officiis, a handbook of ethics for men in public life, he outlines the concept of decorum. Interpreting the Stoic concept of homologia by means of images drawn from literary criticism and the theatre, he portrays virtuous conduct as the consistent acting of a part appropriate to human nature, personal character, and social role.

The two concepts are linked by the common idea of not changing, of being always the same. There are, however, important differences between them. Seneca's constancy is the virtue of a heroic individual who stands alone like "a Colossus" or "a great sea-mark," who is primarily concerned with his personal integrity, self-sufficiency and self-perfection, and aspires to the nature of a god. Cicero's decorum is a moderate, social

virtue, that of a good citizen who fulfils with temperance and consistency his proper role in society. There is obviously a potential conflict
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between the two.

Another theme links the Senecan and Ciceronian concepts: that of role-playing. The metaphor of life as a play is a traditional Stoic one, classically stated by Epictetus:

Remember that you are an actor in a play, and the Playwright chooses the manner of it [Y]our business is to act the character that is given you and act it well; the choice of the cast is Another's.³⁹

Cicero's decorum is explicitly described in theatrical metaphors, as the playing of a role without slipping out of character. Many critics, most notably T. S. Eliot, have seen something equally histrionic in Senecan
40
Stoicism, preoccupied as it is with grand gestures and heroic poses.

Both Seneca's and Cicero's concepts of virtuous action depend upon being performed on a public stage for the approval of others. The good man must not only be virtuous but must be seen to be virtuous: esse est percipi. This external, self-dramatising strain in Roman Stoicism contrasts oddly with the "inwardness" of Stoic ethics, its theoretical stress on morality
41
as "an affair of the inner life." There is a particular irony in the fact that to conceive virtue as a public performance means that the performer's success must be publicly judged by others - and so places him at the mercy of that mere "opinion" which, in Stoic epistemology and ethics, is the root of all evil.

Shakespeare's treatment of constancy in the Roman plays shows his awareness of these conflicts and ironies. This is not to suggest that Shakespeare had a detailed knowledge of or interest in Stoic philosophy, or that he had ever heard of Zeno's homologia. He had, however, almost certainly read Cicero's De officiis, probably at school (as T. W. Baldwin

has demonstrated); and even if he had not read Seneca's moral essays and epistles, or even his plays, he could not have avoided hearing his aphorisms quoted.⁴² Moreover, in the 1590s and early 1600s Stoic virtue and constancy were topical issues. Works by the European Neostoic writers, who made constancy the central virtue of a revived and Christianised Stoicism, were being translated into English: Justus Lipsius' De constantia in 1595, Guillaume du Vair's Philosophie morale des stoiques in 1598.⁴³ Shakespeare may have known these books; he certainly read Florio's translation of Montaigne's Essays, and would there have encountered both the Neostoic concept of constancy and a critique of it. Constancy and inconstancy (in all their senses) are leading themes throughout the Essays; Montaigne, at first a devotee of constancy, later comes to reject it as an impossible, self-contradictory, and perhaps even undesirable ideal. His view closely parallels, and perhaps influenced, Shakespeare's.

Shakespeare is thus contributing to a topical debate when he makes constancy a central issue in the Roman plays. Constancy is, of course, a traditional Roman virtue - perhaps the quintessential Roman virtue which is central to all others, the one most appropriate to the urbs aeterna. Shakespeare's stress on constancy, in its Senecan and Ciceronian forms, is part of his recreation of the ancient Roman ethos. Nevertheless, it seems likely that he would not have given the theme such prominence if he were not aware that Neostoic writers, at the time he was writing, were reviving the Roman Stoic virtue of constancy as a response to present-day ills.

Shakespeare's attitude to constancy has an ambivalence that is very characteristic of critics of Stoicism from Cicero onwards. In some ways he is drawn towards it. His preoccupation with mutability both in the world and in human relationships, and his desire for some form of permanence - both clearly seen in the Sonnets - make him sympathetic to

the ideal which he allowed Proteus to voice in The Two Gentlemen of Verona: "O heaven, were man / But constant, he were perfect!"⁴⁴ At the same time, he shows the flaws in Stoic constancy, implying traditional criticisms which derive ultimately from Cicero or Augustine: of its arrogant and self-deceiving aspiration towards godlike perfection, its inhuman denial of emotion, its unrealistically rigid moral absolutism, its concentration on death rather than life.

Shakespeare's originality lies in his awareness of the complexity of "constancy," the different senses of the word and the potential conflict between them. To be "constant" can mean to aspire to the immovable and godlike virtue of the Senecan sapiens, but also to play with unwavering decorum and consistency the social role in which one is cast. Constancy as aspiring individualism and constancy as social role-playing can easily come into conflict, as Coriolanus most obviously finds. In Shakespeare's Rome, moreover, a society governed by opinion, Ciceronian decorum tends to become divorced from the self-knowledge on which Cicero insisted, while even Senecan constancy can become a matter of acting a part.

These problems are encapsulated in Brutus' lines quoted at the beginning of this introduction, from which I have taken the title of my thesis: "untir'd spirits and formal constancy." "Untir'd spirits" suggests the inner strength of the Senecan Stoic hero, enduring and immovable; "formal constancy," picking up the image of "Roman actors," suggests Ciceronian decorum, the consistent acting of an appropriate part. More subtly, the contrast may suggest a problem which is inherent in both the Senecan and Ciceronian ideals: is constancy a spiritual reality or a matter of outward appearances? Or - as is suggested by the perverse attribution of "constancy" to actors and the submerged theatrical pun in "untir'd" - is it impossible to separate the two? Whether or not Shakespeare consciously intended these implications, the tension between the

two halves of this densely-packed line may be seen as a miniature image of
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 the tensions which run through all three Roman plays.

My treatment of the topic will fall into three parts. Part I, "The Classical Sources," will deal with the two main sources of the idea of constancy, Seneca's constantia sapientis, and Cicero's Roman virtue and decorum; it will also examine the pattern of a "constancy triptych" which Shakespeare may have perceived in Plutarch's Lives of Brutus, Antony, and Coriolanus. Part II, "The Renaissance Debate," will sketch in the conflicting attitudes to Stoic virtue inherited by the Renaissance, look briefly at the handling of constancy and opinion by four representative Neostoic writers, and then in more depth at Montaigne's changing view of constancy and inconstancy, which closely parallels Shakespeare's. Part III, "Shakespeare's Constant Romans," will analyse Shakespeare's handling
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 of these themes in Julius Caesar, Coriolanus, and Antony and Cleopatra.

PART ONE

THE CLASSICAL SOURCES

CHAPTER TWO

SENECA AND THE CONSTANCY OF THE STOIC HERO

[1] Introduction

"No Stoic author has exerted a greater influence on posterity than Seneca." For later centuries he has always been, in the words of Erasmus Folly, "the Archestoike," and his extravagant style and his own ambiguous character and career have made him a focus for both admiration and hostility towards the Stoic ideal. In particular he is identified with the idea of constancy as a heroic virtue, and with the image of the sapiens, the Stoic hero-sage - courageous, passionless, immovably enduring in adversity, demonstrating his superiority to fortune by resolute death or suicide. It is an ideal of which Shakespeare and his Roman heroes are very conscious.

The question of Seneca's influence on Shakespeare has been much debated, but the debate has centred around his plays and their influence on English tragedy in general. His prose essays and moral letters, which one scholar has called "a greater and more pervasive influence" in the English Renaissance, have been neglected. Most of these works were not translated into English until Thomas Lodge's version of the complete prose works in 1614, and T. W. Baldwin, in his massive study of Shakespeare's education, concludes there is no reason to suppose he read Seneca at

school or indeed at any time, though he may have picked up "some moral crumbs in the form of sententiae."⁵ Most critics have tacitly accepted T. S. Eliot's dismissal: "I think it quite unlikely that Shakespeare knew anything of that extraordinarily dull and uninteresting body of Seneca's prose...."⁶

It is not my purpose in this chapter to prove, against these views, that Shakespeare was directly influenced by Seneca's moral writings. My concern with Seneca is as the ultimate source (for the Renaissance) of a concept of Stoic constancy which clearly influenced Shakespeare's Roman plays, both in their general moral structure and in specific echoes of phrases and images. In the 1590s and 1600s Seneca was at one of the peaks of his popularity and influence, and Shakespeare could scarcely have avoided encountering his doctrines and his memorable sayings on virtue, passion, suffering and death.⁷ Whether he did so directly, through reading Seneca's moral works at school or in later life, or through the English translations of his tragedies, or indirectly, from collections of sententiae, from Neostoic writers such as Montaigne (who quotes Seneca profusely), or simply from talk with admirers of Seneca such as Jonson or Chapman, is less important (I would argue) than the ultimate provenance of the ideas.

In this chapter, with reference ~~with reference~~ mainly to Seneca's prose works and especially De constantia sapientis, I shall examine the Senecan concept of constancy: an ideal of being always the same (unus idemque inter diversa), self-consistent, immovable by passion or suffering - an ideal pictured in Seneca's central images of the tranquil god and the invulnerable rock. I shall suggest that this ideal involves a strain of performance or pretence, a striving by the Stoic to appear "alwaies like himselfe" (as Lodge renders unus idemque), which reaches its climax in the idea of suicide as a public manifestation of constancy.

Finally, a brief glance at Seneca's tragedies will suggest how in them the ideal of heroic constancy can become a purely amoral drive towards self-realisation.

I have taken my quotations from Lodge's translation, although Shakespeare could not have used it, because it provides a closely contemporary rendering, with interesting coincidences of phrasing. In particular it gives increased stress to the idea of constancy, introducing the word in many places where the Latin uses a synonym or no corresponding word at all. The allegorical title page of the 1620 edition, indeed, prominently features the figure of Constancy: a seated woman whose right hand clasps a pillar, while her left, holding a sword, rests in a burning brazier, and her calm smile demonstrates her indifference to pain. It is a remarkably suggestive emblem, not only summing up the elements of Senecan constancy - immovability, courage, tranquillity, invulnerability - but also, in its studied pose of self-sought suffering, capturing something of the Senecan ethic of poses.

[2] Constantia sapientis

Seneca's conception of constancy is most clearly expressed in the essay De constantia sapientis, subtitled Nec injuriam nec contumeliam accipere sapientem ("That a wise man cannot feel any injury"). As Pierre Grimal points out in his commentary on the work, the title and subtitle are not simply synonymous. We must examine the work to see precisely what Seneca means by constantia.

The heroic quality of Seneca's "constancy" is made clear at the beginning, as he compares Stoicism with other philosophies which pander to human weakness:

The Stoickes entertaining a more constant [virilem] course, they care not whether their followers find the way pleasant or no, but labour to pull us presently out of danger, and to conduct us to so high a place, which is so farre raised above any humane miserie, that it over-looketh Fortune.¹¹

The rewards, however, are commensurate with the demands. The Stoic sapiens is invulnerable to harm either from other men or from fortune. "A Wiseman is secure, neither can hee bee touched with any injurie or
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contumelie."

At this point Seneca imagines a protest from his interlocutor that these are merely fine words without substance: "you promise great things, and such as neyther may be wished, nor can be believed." Like the Stoic paradoxes of the wise man who is always rich and free, this claim of invulnerability is merely a hyperbolical metaphor for the commonplace idea that the sapiens will endure suffering patiently. "Thus, after you have braved a long time, you fall into the condition of other men; and there is no difference betweene you, but in change of names." Seneca defends myself: "my intent is not to dignifie a Wise man with an imaginarie honour of words, but to lodge him in such a place where no injurie may attaine
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unto him." The wise man will certainly be attacked, but - quite literally - he cannot be hurt.

Seneca expresses this invulnerability in two strains of imagery. The first suggests that the wise man is as hard as a rock, and impenetrable:

Even as there are certaine hard stones which Iron cannot enter, and the Adamant will neither be cut, filed or beat to powder, but abateth the edge of those tooles that are applied unto it: as there are certaine things which cannot be consumed by fire, but continue their hardnesse and habitude amidst the flames; and even as the rocks that are fixed in the heart of the sea, breake the waves, and although they have been assaulted, and beat upon many infinite times, retaine no impression of the stormes that have assailed them; even so the heart of a wise man is solid, and hath gathered such force that hee is as secure from injurie, as those I made mention of.¹⁴

The second image suggests that the wise man is raised, like a god, too high to be reached by human attacks:

...hee is so highly raised above all the attaints of worldly things, that there is no violence whatsoever, that can aime his attempts so hie Even as celestiall things are not subject to humane hands, and they that overturne temples, and melt downe Images, doe no wayes hurt the Deitie: so whatsoever is attempted eyther crabbedly, immodestly, or proudly against a wise man, is done in vaine.¹⁵

We must look in more detail later at the implications of these two images, which recur throughout Seneca's works.

The source of the wise man's rocklike or godlike invulnerability is his indifference to external things. He does not "esteeme any thing his except it be himselfe, or in regard of that part of himselfe which maketh him vertuous."¹⁶ The external world and everything in it is under the control of fortune; it is fickle, mutable, ever-changing. Only the mind can be stable and unchanging. Benefits granted by fortune are merely on loan and may vanish at any time, and the wise man must be prepared to surrender them. The liberating power of this total self-reliance is illustrated by the story of the philosopher Stilbon of Megara, who, when his city was captured and sacked, and the conquering general asked him how much he had lost, replied that he had lost nothing: "I carry all my goods with mee."

Amidst so many naked weapons, amidst the tumult of so many boote-haling souldiers; betwixt fire & bloud, and the sacke of a Citie, surprised by assault, amidst the ruine of temples falling upon the Gods; one only man remained quiet and constant [uni homini pax fuit].¹⁷

He tells the conqueror, "Thou must not thinke ... that I am overcome, or thou art victorious. Thy fortune hath overcome mine...." Shakespeare's Cleopatra - an improbable Stoic - has this idea and perhaps this story in mind when she calls Octavius Caesar "but Fortune's knave" and informs his

emissary with conscious irony that "I am his fortune's vassal." Power and victories granted by fortune are meaningless; the only true power is that of the sapiens, who, knowing the worthlessness of external success and failure, can meet those two imposters with constancy and tranquillity of mind.¹⁸

Seneca cites Stilbon as an exemplar of the constancy (firmitas) which this attitude makes possible. His example shows

that a mortall man may raise himselfe above all the accidents of this life, may regard with an assured eye the paines, losses, wounds and stroakes, and the hurliburly of infinite calamities that environ him; that hee may endure adversitie, content himselfe moderately in prosperitie, without relying on this, or grudging himself at that, but remaining alwaies like himselfe in good and evill fortune [unus idemque inter diversa]. . . .¹⁹

Such a sapiens is more invulnerable than the walls of Babylon or Carthage, or the Roman Capitol (a comparison which Menenius perhaps recalls in comparing the immovability of Coriolanus to that of "yond coign o' th' Capitol"). Physical fortresses can be invaded or overthrown, "but the fortresses that defence the Wise man, cannot bee surprised, neither feare they fire, they cannot be entred or scaled, or undermined, they are impregnable like the nature of the gods [diis aequa]."²⁰

Seneca's constantia, therefore, is primarily the quality of remaining unchanged and unmoved in mind in all circumstances. The key phrase is unus idemque inter diversa, one and the same amid changing circumstances. Lodge here translates unus idemque - as elsewhere, more literally, phrases like similis sibi and par sibi - as "like himselfe," a common Elizabethan formula for describing heroic virtue. Shakespeare uses the same phrase, most notably in the lines in Julius Caesar (closely adapted from North's Plutarch) in which Lucilius predicts Brutus's suicide: "When you do find him, or alive or dead, / He will be found like Brutus, like himself."²¹

Shakespeare, North, and Lodge all draw on the same traditional formula to

sum up the essence of Stoic constancy. There is, however, a subtle difference between Seneca's unus idemque and Lodge's "like himself", though they convey the same basic idea. Where Seneca asserts that the wise man simply is always the same, Lodge suggests that he strives to resemble an ideal version of himself; where Seneca asserts identity, Lodge implies imitation. The suggestion of conscious role-playing introduced in the English translation is, as I shall argue later, not untrue to the implications of Seneca's idea of constancy.²²

To be unus idemque, always the same, self-consistent, is a fundamental Stoic ideal, derived from Zeno's principle of homologia. Seneca recurs to this ideal of consistency repeatedly in his letters, using the terms aequalitas (uniformity) or tenor (steady course) rather than constantia. He insists on its importance for true wisdom and virtue. Perfect virtue requires "an equalitie and tenour of life in every thing consonant unto it selfe."²³ The "greatest office, and token of Wisdome" is "that the actions be correspondent to the words, and that shee which followeth her be alwaies equall and like unto himselfe [ut ipse ubique par sibi idemque sit]." Wisdom itself can be defined as "Alwaies to will one thing, and to nill the same."²⁴ Another passage begins in a way which strongly recalls Polonius' advice to Laertes:

And above all things let this bee thy care, that thou be constant to thy selfe [ut constes tibi]. ... The change of the will betokeneth that the minde swimmeth in one place, and appeareth in another, even as the wind carrieth it. That which is firme and hath a good foundation varieth not. This perfectly happeneth to a Wise-man, and in some measure to a Proficient [i.e. one who is making progress toward wisdom].... What difference is there then? He that profiteth is in a manner moved, yet forsaketh he not his place, but returneth to his bounds; the perfect Wise-man is in no sort moved.²⁵

The closeness of this to constantia sapientis is underlined by Lodge's translation and Lipsius' headnote, which sums up the advice of the letter as "to live conveniently, that is, constantly, that is, wisely."²⁶

The relationship between aequalitas and constantia is made clearer in a passage in Letter 120. Seneca is praising the wisdom of the sapiens who is indifferent to external things and treats them as merely on loan. When we encounter such constantia we recognise it as a sign of true greatness of soul - especially, Seneca adds, if it is combined with consistency (aequalitas); for only consistency (tenor) truly lasts, pretended virtues do not.²⁷ "Inconstancie [mutatio] ... is a great token of an evill minde." Seneca goes on to quote Horace's satirical description of an inconstant man,

who was never himselfe or ever like himselfe [numquam eundem, ne similem cuidem sibi]; so diversly changed he. ... Hereby especially is an imprudent mind discovered, everie one betrayeth him, and that which in my opinion is most base, he is unlike himselfe [impar sibi est]. Repute thou it a great vertue for a man to be one. But no man but a wise man doth one thing, all the rest of us have many shapes. To day we will seeme to be modest and grave, to morrow prodigall and vaine: we oftentimes change our maske, and oftentimes take a contrarie to that we have put off. Exact thou therefore this of thy selfe, that to thy last breath thou maintaine thy selfe such, as thou hast resolved to shew thy selfe.²⁸

Seneca's image of virtue as the consistent acting of a part is essentially the same as Cicero's concept of decorum; probably Seneca, like Cicero, is drawing upon the ideas of Panaetius.²⁹ I shall deal in detail with decorum in the next chapter, and will also discuss the implications of externality and theatricality in this image of virtue in both Seneca and Cicero. At present, however, the point I want to stress about this passage is the way Seneca associates, yet clearly distinguishes, two kinds of constancy: aequalitas, the consistency or harmony of one's actions, which can be metaphorically described as the acting of the same part or wearing of the same mask throughout one's life; and the constantia of the sapiens, the unchanging stability and immovability which comes from a refusal to be swayed by emotions or external pressures.

It is this latter kind of constancy which dominates in De constantia sapientis, which deals specifically with the constancy of the wise man. As Seneca argues in Letter 35, whereas the ordinary good man wavers only slightly from his moral position, the sapiens is absolutely immovable and immutable. His virtue, moreover, is not merely to remain consistent, but to do so under extreme pressure, without the slightest alteration to his equanimity and tranquillity of mind. Thus Seneca pushes the idea of constancy (consistency) towards that of constancy (steadfastness), turning it into a heroic rather than an everyday virtue. It is primarily the virtue with which one must face extreme suffering or death: "Constancie, which cannot be dejected from her place, and giveth not over her resolution by no fear of torture."³⁰

Seneca's handling of "constancy" profoundly affects its meaning for later writers. He also makes it a controversial ideal. Few moralists would dispute the desirability of consistency, but Seneca's more grandiose claims for the power and worth of constancy are harder to accept. Seneca acknowledges this in the debate with his interlocutor in the opening chapters of De constantia sapientis - a dialogue which lies behind many later debates between Stoic and anti-Stoic.

Much of the peculiar quality of Seneca's constantia sapientis is embodied in the two patterns of imagery which he uses to describe it: the god and the rock. The sapiens is either so high and godlike that he is indifferent to earthly affairs, or so hard and insensible that he cannot be hurt by any external force. These two images reflect the strange coexistence in Senecan Stoicism of aspiration and humility: on the one hand, passive submission to fate, like the weatherbeaten rock "fixed in the heart of the sea"; on the other hand, pride in the absolute and godlike power of the wise man's soul to remain unchanged by external

changes.

These images have also served, in the hands of later critics, to focus the two principal attacks on Senecan Stoicism. The image of the sapiens as god arouses protest against the blasphemous pride of claiming godlike perfection. The image of the sapiens as rock arouses revulsion against the apparent inhumanity of Stoic apatheia, which glorifies insensitivity and denies emotion and suffering. Stoic constancy, in the eyes of its critics, is either superhuman or subhuman, but not human.

In the next two sections I shall look in more detail at the implications of these images.

[3] The Stoic as god

Seneca's recurring image of the sapiens as like or equal to a god, diis aequa, sums up the Stoic aspiration to moral perfection and absolute power over oneself. The comparison rests mainly on the wise man's constancy and tranquillity of mind. "He may be termed, and is wise, who is replenished with joy, glad and moderate, and that feeleth no passion [est ... inconcussus], liveth equal with the gods." ³¹ The sapiens, like a god, is inconcussus, unshaken and immovable; his perfect happiness can never be disturbed; he is far above being affected, either for good or ill, by anything that happens on earth. "As the immortall gods neither desire to be aided, neither can bee hurt; no more also can a wise man, who is neighbor to the gods, and like unto God, except in this that he is ³² subject to death...."

The same comparison and qualification appear in De providentia:

Vertue hath contracted an amiable friendship betwixt good men and God. Say I friendship? Nay rather a kindred and likeness, because a good man onely differeth from God but in time [bonus

tempore tantum a deo differt]; he is his scholler, his follower and his true child.

Such aphorisms may lie behind Menenius' bitter description of Coriolanus:

"He wants nothing of a god but eternity and a heaven to throne in."³³

Coriolanus is scarcely a sapiens, but he aspires to the wise man's absolute immovability and imperturbability, and fails (as Menenius' qualification hints) because, being mortal and earthbound, he cannot finally cut himself off from his human ties.

The admitted differences between the sapiens and god may, indeed, work to the advantage of the sapiens. In De providentia Seneca suggests that the wise man is in a sense superior to God, because God is unable to suffer: "he is without the patience of evill, you above the patience."³⁴

The idea is developed in Letter 73. After praising the tranquillity of the philosopher "which we partake with the gods, that maketh us become gods," Seneca demands, "What advantage hath Jupiter over a good man? It is but onely this, he is more long time good. ... That vertue is not greater which is longer...." On the contrary, the sapiens is superior in that, unlike Jupiter, he is capable of temptation and moral weakness, but overcomes these failings by his own fortitude and self-control. Yet (Seneca concludes) the gods are not envious of men's superiority, and assist them in their aspirations:

The Gods disdain no man; envie no man, they entertaine and stretch forth their hand to those that ascend. Wonderest thou to heare that men goe unto the Gods? God commeth unto men, nay (which is more neere) he commeth into men. There is not any soule that is good without God. There are certaine divine seeds dispersed in the bodies of men, which grow answerable to their originall....³⁵

The image of the seeds of divine fire existing within humanity is a traditional Stoic one; the idea of the gods actively helping humanity in its ascent to heaven is more unusual, and seems to anticipate the

Christian concept of grace. Yet the general tone of the passage is decidedly unchristian, as Lodge's note on it suggests: "At length hee counselleth him to aspire unto vertue, that is, to God; for that (such is the Stoicks pride) they make a Wiseman equall with him."³⁶

The question of the proper relationship between humanity and divinity is a problematic one in ancient thought. Side by side with the idea that a good man's proper duty is to strive to emulate the gods, went the equally traditional idea that such striving is hubris, which deserves and invites divine punishment.³⁷ For Christians the issue is more clear-cut: there is an absolute gulf between the human and the divine, and Seneca's blurring of this distinction is the essence of "the Stoicks pride." Lodge's notes show the uneasiness of even a sympathetic Renaissance reader on this issue; the passage in De providentia on the likeness between the good man and god, for instance, is labelled "A Stoicall Paradox, which cannot be understood, nor well expressed in the Schooles of humanitie, but in that of the holy Ghost."³⁸ From an orthodox Christian point of view, Seneca makes unacceptably inflated claims for what merely human virtue can accomplish.

Seneca's conception of the godlike Stoic is one of his most influential contributions to the tradition, and is reflected in all of Shakespeare's Roman plays. Julius Caesar "is now become a god," and compares himself in his immovable constancy to Mount Olympus, in an image which brilliantly fuses Seneca's images of god and rock; Coriolanus strives to "imitate the graces of the gods," and "wants nothing of a god but eternity"; even Antony is insistently associated with divinity and with Seneca's demigod hero Hercules.³⁹ One of the driving forces of Shakespeare's Roman heroes is the desire to rise above normal humanity, to attain a godlike immovability, invulnerability, and superiority to earthly changes.

[4] The Stoic as rock: emotion and suffering

The second image, of the sapiens as rock, sums up the Stoic ideal of apatheia. The Greek word implies both absence of emotion and imperviousness to pain. For the Stoics these two things are inseparably linked: it is our emotional reactions to external events which cause suffering, and the eradication of these emotions brings about a state of constancy and tranquillity which is unmoved by anything external. The sapiens, like Horatio, "is not passion's slave" and therefore is "not a pipe for Fortune's finger / To sound what stop she please."⁴⁰ This ideal, like that of the godlike sapiens, is hard for non-Stoics to accept. Hostile critics have often turned the image of the rock against the Stoics, interpreting it not as a symbol of self-control and fortitude, but of inhuman insensibility - a criticism enshrined in English in the recurring pun on "Stoic" and "stock".⁴¹

The Stoic view of emotion rests, in a sense, upon a metaphor. Both in Latin and English, feelings and passions are described in terms of movement: motus, "emotion," to be "moved." To be "constant" (literally, standing still) implies a refusal to be "moved." Hence the constant wise man must not be moved by passion. Emotions (motus or adfectus) are "improbable, sudden and violent motions of the mind" which, if allowed to become frequent and habitual, will develop into "sicknesses of the soule" (morbi animi) - settled perversions of values such as cowardice, cruelty,⁴² or ambition. Progress towards the status of sapiens requires the gradual elimination first of such mental illnesses, then of all emotions.

Seneca acknowledges that this ideal is hard to achieve, and that even the sapiens, though free from passion, will retain "certaine touches of

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suspicion and shadowes of passion." Nevertheless, in principle, emotions must be eradicated; it is impossible simply to control them. "We should fight against affections ... with all the force we can make": they must not be trimmed back, but totally crushed. Stoic absolutism on this point contrasts with the more permissive Aristotelian view that moderate emotion can be harmless or even beneficial. This, Seneca retorts, is as absurd as saying that it is proper to be moderately mad or moderately ill. In Stoic psychology, as we have seen, the mind of an angry or frightened man is not suffering a conflict between reason and emotion, but is wholly taken over and "changed her selfe into passion." It is therefore impossible for passion to be controlled by reason, and Aristotle was quite wrong to suggest that (for instance) a soldier may find anger a useful tool: "Reason ... will never take to her assistants, improvident and violent passions over whom she hath no authority, and whom shee never may restrain except she oppose their equals and likes unto them, as feare to Anger, Anger to cowardise, desire to feare."

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The wise man, therefore, must act because of his rational knowledge of what is right, not because he is impelled by fickle and disturbing emotions.

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What then (saith he) shall not a good man be angry, if he see his father strooken, his Mother ravished? Hee shall not bee angrie, but revenge and defend them. ... A good man executeth his offices without confusion or feare, and in such sort will performe those things that are worthy a good man, that hee will doe nothing that is unworthy a man.

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The same principle justifies one of the most controversial Stoic doctrines, that pity is a vice. Seneca is aware that popular opinion regards this doctrine as "over-severe" (literally "too hard," duram nimis), but he insists that, while the good man will act charitably and mercifully, he must not allow his mind to be disturbed by the suffering of others, any more than by his own.

For a Wiseman neyther troubleth nor tormenteth himselfe, his understanding is alwayes cleere, neither can any thing happen that may obscure the light thereof. Nothing becommeth a man more than greatnesse of courage [magnus animus]; But he cannot have a noble heart, if eyther feare or grieffe doe daunt the same, or any of these passions obscure or contract it. This shall not befall a Wiseman; no, not in his [sc. own] calamities, but he shall dart back againe all those Arrowes that Fortune hath shot against him, and shall breake them before her face. He shall retayne one and the same countenance, alwayes both peaceable and constant [inconcussam], which he might not doe if sorrow were lodged in his heart.⁴⁸

The constant man must both be, and be seen to be, entirely "unmoved" by emotion.

The relevance of the Stoic view of reason and passion to Shakespeare's Roman plays is too obvious to be laboured. Of course, Shakespeare did not need to read Seneca to use such commonplace ideas; all Renaissance ethical writers were agreed on the dangers of unrestrained emotion, although the Stoics were felt to take this view to a possibly unchristian extreme. The Romans, moreover, were famous for rationality and self-control. In depicting such cool and passionless Romans as Brutus and Octavius, and in playing off in Antony and Cleopatra rational, self-controlled Romans against volatile, emotional Egyptians, Shakespeare is consciously manipulating stereotypes.

His portrayal of Brutus, however, seems more specifically Stoic. Brutus praises Caesar on the grounds that "I have not known when his affections sway'd / More than his reason," and tries in the same way to divorce his personal feelings for Caesar from his rational judgements about him. He is reluctant to be "mov'd," and always strives to maintain an air of calm rationality - most obviously in his quarrel with the passionate Cassius. Nevertheless, he is not a sapiens. His emotions are suppressed and hidden, but not eradicated; they still disturb his mind.⁴⁹ Despite his taut self-control in the quarrel scene, he finally bursts out in excessive anger at a trivial provocation, and reveals the cause to be

his suppressed grief for his wife's death. He desires, but fails to achieve, the absolute tranquillity and constancy of the Stoic sapiens.

Brutus is at his most Stoic when he insists that the conspirators kill Caesar "boldly, but not wrathfully": the good man must do what is right without the "confusion" of anger. He immediately adds, however,

And let our hearts, as subtle masters do,
Stir up their servants to an act of rage,
And after seem to chide 'em.⁵⁰

He thus acknowledges the need for reason to be aided by "improvident and violent passions," while attempting to obey Senecan principle by ascribing the "rage" to hands rather than hearts. The artificiality of this disjunction, and the unpleasant hypocrisy implied by Brutus' simile, suggests Shakespeare's view that Seneca's teaching on the emotions is unrealistic and self-deceiving. The passions of Shakespeare's Romans, especially in Julius Caesar, remain powerful despite their repression, perhaps all the more powerful because they are repressed.

The Stoic view is that a person who is completely unmoved by emotion is completely invulnerable. Since suffering arises from erroneous emotional reactions to external events, the elimination of such reactions will eliminate all suffering. The passionless sapiens is not only as immovable as a rock, but also as hard and unyielding, unable to be hurt by any external force.

But is the sapiens really invulnerable? Seneca betrays some uneasiness about the rock image and so about the claim of absolute invulnerability. In a passage of De constantia, quoted earlier, he compares the wise man to "certaine hard stones which Iron cannot enter," to adamant or asbestos, or to rocks in the midst of a stormy sea which "retaine no impression of the stormes that have assailed them." Later, however, the metaphor is reversed. Seneca, having asserted that the wise

man is indifferent to mere slights and irritations, goes on to discuss genuine afflictions:

I deny not but a wise man hath some sence of these evils, for we say not that he is hard and stupide, like a flint or as a barre of Iron. There is no vertue that hath not a sence of that which she suffereth.... I confesse that a wiseman receiveth some strokes, but he rebateth them, he healeth them, and maketh them without effect....⁵¹

The imperviousness of a rock, earlier seen as possible and desirable, is now seen as an impossible and undesirable insensibility. In rejecting this image Seneca humanises his sapiens, but also undercuts the picture of superhuman invulnerability presented earlier in De constantia, and lays himself open to the objection of his interlocutor in the opening chapters: that the Stoic wise man has no special power over fortune, merely a great deal of commonplace endurance.

Is the sapiens, then, really invulnerable, or does he merely pretend to be? This question arises again in a difficult passage later in De constantia. Seneca is here appealing to Epicurus in (partial) support of his position.

The Epicure saith, that a wise man ought to endure injuries, but we say that a Wise man cannot be injured.

Neither hast thou cause to conclude that this repugneth against Nature. We doe not denie but that it is an incommodious thing to be beaten, to be enforced, and to be maimed in some member; but we denie that these are injuries. We take not from them the sence of paine, but the name of injury which cannot bee admitted without empeachment of vertues reputation [nomen injuriae, quod non potest recipi virtute salva]. ... Askest thou me wherein they differ? Such difference is there betweene them as betweene two stout sword-players, whereof the one [stoppeth] his wound and standeth on his guard; the other, looking backe at the people that crie out, maketh shew that it is nothing, and will not endure to have them parted.⁵²

Seneca here comes close to granting his interlocutor's charge of being concerned only with "an imaginarie honour of words" in his insistence upon

denying only "the name of injury." The Stoic, apparently, feels as much pain as anyone else but refuses to call it "pain." In the image of the two gladiators, the Epicurean fights on in spite of being wounded, the Stoic pretends that he is not wounded. The Stoic hero is seen as a performer in the public arena, whose heroism consists in his public denial of his genuine pain. The subversive implication of this image is that all Stoics may in fact be like Shakespeare's Brutus, who suffers pain and confusion but keeps it resolutely concealed, who refuses to display any public emotion even at his wife's death, though the "Epicure" Cassius protests

I have as much of this in art as you,
But yet my nature could not bear it so.⁵³

[5] The ethic of poses

The image of the two gladiators suggests Seneca's tendency to see virtue as a public performance. Questions of truth or pretence are secondary to the effect of the performance on its spectators. The Stoic hero, like a gladiator in the arena, must publicly display his constancy before an audience of men or gods.

So, in De providentia, Seneca describes the suicide of the Stoic martyr Cato of Utica in terms of a gladiatorial show. Just as we take pleasure at the games in watching "a young man of a constant resolution" courageously fighting a lion, so (he argues) the gods take pleasure in the "spectacle" of heroic human virtue in combat with adverse fortune.

I see not, say I, what thing Jupiter hath more admirable upon the earth, if he would fix his mind upon the same, then to behold Cato remaining firme and resolute ... and invincible amidst his countries ruines.... I assure my selfe, that the gods with great

joy beheld, when this great and worthie personage, a powerfull protector of himselfe, travelled to save others, and gave them meanes to escape: who likewise, in that last night of his life, followed his studie, whilst he thrust his sword into his belly, whilst he scattered abroad his bowels....

The reason for the failure of Cato's first suicide attempt was (Seneca suggests) that the gods took such pleasure in the "spectacle" that they demanded a repeat performance:

It sufficed not the immortal gods to behold Cato once, vertue was retained, and revoked, to the end that in a greater difficultie shee might approve her selfe. For there is more greater resolution in dying the second or third time, then in dying at the first.⁵⁴

(The theatrical imagery is stronger in the Latin, since revocata can mean "encored", and in difficiliore parte is literally "in a more demanding role.")

The vision of the gods as sadistic voyeurs who "kill us for their sport" is appalling, but Seneca does not seem conscious of this.⁵⁵ His avowed aim is to justify the ways of God to man. If the gods allow good men to suffer, it is because virtue, to be virtue, must be seen in action.

Vertue hath no vertue, if it be not impugned; then appeareth [apparet] it how great it is, of what value and power it is, when by patience it approveth [ostendit] what it may.⁵⁶

Two ideas are here confusingly mingled: that virtue needs to be tested by suffering, and that it needs to be publicly displayed. "Vertue hath no vertue" (literally it withers away, marcet) if it is not exercised, but also if it is not shown. You may be a great man, Seneca tells his reader, "but how shall I know it, if Fortune give thee not leave and meanes to make prooffe of [in qua ... ostenderet] thy vertue? ... No man, no not thy selfe shall bee able to know thy value...."⁵⁷ A virtue which is not seen may as well not exist.

Such passages, with their recurrence of words like apparere and ostendere, suggest that in Senecan ethics esse est percipi. Constancy is at least partly a matter of appearances - of appearing always the same, of not being visibly moved. The wise man must "retayne one and the same countenance [faciem]" ; he is advised to "maintaine thy selfe such, as thou hast resolved to shew [praestare] thy selfe." ⁵⁸ The wise man is a performer who, like the wounded gladiator, must keep a poker face and refuse to acknowledge pain or emotion.

This quality of performance in Senecan Stoicism was brilliantly summed up by T. S. Eliot in his two essays on Seneca and Shakespeare. He traces the "attitude of self-dramatization" of Shakespeare's tragic heroes to the externality and theatricality of Senecan virtue. ⁵⁹

...the ethic of Seneca's plays is that of an age which supplied the lack of moral habits by a system of moral attitudes and poses. To this the natural public temper of Rome contributed. The ethic of Seneca is a matter of postures. The posture which gives the greatest opportunity for effect, hence for the Senecan morality, is the posture of dying: death gives his characters the opportunity for their most sententious aphorisms.... ⁶⁰

Seneca's morality - in spite of its stress on inner resources and the rock-hard invulnerable core of the individual soul - is essentially, as Eliot saw, a public and external one. His essays and letters are full of "postures," grand scenes and heroic gestures; even Stilbon, the exemplar of inner tranquillity and constancy of mind, is presented as a hero because he publicly demonstrated that quality and summed it up in a memorably "sententious aphorism." This is a theatrical ethic, and it is only appropriate that it finds its most memorable expression in drama - first in Seneca's own plays, and later in English Renaissance drama.

Eliot is unjust, however, in implying that Seneca's "postures" are merely hollow and self-glorifying. His insistence on the public exhibition of virtue is partly justified by what Eliot calls the "public

temper of Rome." Seneca was writing for Roman aristocrats in the time of Nero, men in public life for whom even withdrawal from politics was a political act, and for whom exhortations to courage in the face of torture, imprisonment, and disgrace were very relevant. Miriam T. Griffin, in this context, appositely cites the words in Tacitus of the Stoic Thrasea Paetus, who urged his friends to observe him as he committed suicide on Nero's orders: "For you have been born ... into an age when 61 examples of fortitude [constantibus exemplis] may be a useful support."

It is such constantia exempla which Seneca provides in writing, and urges his readers to provide in life. For this reason "it is for the profite and advantage of the whole world, that there is some one invincible, that there is some one, over whom Fortune hath no power"; it is "for the good of all men" that "everie one of the better sort ... beare armes and performe actions," to demonstrate by their constant endurance 62 that adversity is not to be feared. Good men must suffer and endure, and do so publicly, to teach moral lessons to the rest of humanity. This is the purpose of Seneca's frequent roll-calls of heroic martyrs - in De tranquillitate, for example, where he cites the deaths of Socrates, Pompey, Cato and others, and urges the reader to "Consider how every one of them behaved himselfe constantly [quomodo quisque illorum tulerit]" and say, "The more constant, the more happy thou art." 63 Such examples are inspirational, teaching us that suffering and death are not to be feared and that they can be overcome by human constancy. For this purpose it is necessary that constancy be publicly displayed; a cloistered and fugitive virtue has no exemplary value. In the words of Coriolanus to his son, the Stoic hero ought to stand

Like a great sea-mark, standing every flaw,
And saving those that eye thee! 64

"The posture of dying" provides, as Eliot said, the most effective example

of constancy, and a study of Seneca's treatment of heroic death and suicide is perhaps the best summing-up of the meaning of Senecan constancy.

[6] The posture of dying: death and suicide

Suicide is the ultimate act of Stoic constancy. It can be seen as summing up all the aspects of constancy which I have discussed: as an assertion of rocklike invulnerability and godlike superiority to fortune; as an assertion of immovability and immutability, preferring to die rather than retreat or change or act in a way unworthy of oneself; as the most effectively staged public demonstration of these qualities. It is also, for Christians, the most dangerously unchristian of Stoic acts. For Shakespeare, to die "after the high Roman fashion" - or, from another point of view, to "play the Roman fool" - is perhaps the most distinctively Roman act of all, and he makes suicide one of the dominant motifs of the Roman plays.

Suicide, in Seneca's view, is the last defence of the sapiens against the power of fortune. The truly wise man regards life itself as an "indifferent" thing, not to be valued in itself and to be willingly sacrificed if its preservation would conflict with moral goodness. One who ~~has~~ possesses this wisdom is entirely liberated: "fortune can do nothing over him that knoweth how to die." He cannot be forced to endure any suffering or to do anything evil, since he always has a way of escape by suicide.

[H]ee that hath learned to die, hath forgotten to serve, it is above all power, undoubtedly beyond all. What careth he for prisons, holds, or restraints? He hath alwaies free passage.

There is but one chaine that holdeth us bound, that is the love of life....⁶⁷

Freedom from that chain makes the Stoic totally invulnerable, by enabling him to escape at will from the world of change and fortune.

This is orthodox Stoic wisdom. Seneca, however, recurs obsessively to the subject of death and suicide, and seems to display a kind of death-wish. He puts into the mouth of God a eulogy of suicide as his greatest boon to mankind; he seems at times positively to incite the reader to self-destruction: "Seest thou yonder steepe place? from thence mayest thou descend to thy libertie. ... Seest thou thy throat, thy wesand-pipe, thy heart? These are the meanes to escape servitude." He even suggests that suicide may be justified by mere taedium vitae, quoting the words of a Stoic philosopher to an elderly friend who contemplates it:

Bethinke thy selfe for how long time together thou hast done the same thing. Meate, sleepe, lust, by this circle all the World commeth. Not onely a valiant man, a strong man, a miserable man can have a will to dye, but he also that disdayneth life."⁶⁸

It is hardly surprising that Christians have regarded such preachings as incitements to despair. Scholars disagree whether Seneca distorts orthodox Stoicism by portraying suicide as a peculiarly noble act and recommending it indiscriminately.⁶⁹ His emphasis on the subject may be exceptional, but the death-wish is partly inherent in Stoicism; in preaching contempt both for life's pleasures and for the fear of death, it tends, as Miriam T. Griffin points out, to make death seem like an attractive escape.⁷⁰

This attraction is heightened by what R. J. Kaufmann, in a stimulating article, calls the Stoic "teleological fallacy": the idea "that because death is the 'end' of life in the sense of its termination it is also the 'end' of life in the sense of its proper goal."⁷¹ From this point of view death is the most important act in life, more important

indeed than life, for which life is merely a preparation. To quote again the Stoic counsellor of Letter 77, "It is no great matter to live as all thy slaves live, and all other beasts also. It is a great matter to dye honestly, prudently, and valiantly."⁷³ The moment of death is a uniquely authentic manifestation of the true quality of one's soul, "the day ... which should pronounce the sentence of all my yeres."

All that which hitherto I have either spoken or done, until this houre, is nothing, light and deceivable are those pledges of my mind, and enfolded with many deceits: death shall be the onely faithfull testimonie, whether I have profited or not. Thus prepare I my selfe couragiously for that day, wherein I will pronounce of my selfe and judge, (all crafts and subilties laid aside) whether I speak or thinke constantly, whether the contumacious words whatsoever, which I urged and darted out against fortune, were dissembled or fained.... It then wil appeare ⁷⁴ [apparebit] what thou hast done when thou departest thy life.

This insistence that death determines the quality of one's entire life surely increases the temptation towards suicide. By choosing the moment and manner of his own death, the suicide can ensure that his character will "appeare" in the way he desires. "It skills not whether a man die sooner or later: to die either well or ill, that importeth much; and to die well is to flie the perill of an evill life." Seneca no doubt does not intend the implication that death may be a way of running away from the moral risks of life. His point is that a person who is willing to die cannot be corrupted or forced to compromise or change, but can maintain his integrity and remain constant to the end.⁷⁵

Seneca refers to this reason for suicide, the preservation of one's moral integrity, as dignitas (Lodge translates the word "honour") - a word which normally refers to public authority or rank.⁷⁶ Griffin suggests that Seneca is here drawing upon the ideas of Panaetius concerning what Cicero calls decorum: that is, virtue as the consistent playing of an appropriate role. To die for the sake of dignitas is to ensure "that to

thy last breath thou maintaine thy selfe such, as thou hast resolved to shew thy selfe" - to play one's role consistently to the end, and to die "like oneself". This concept of death as a performance is perfectly exemplified in the suicides of such Roman Stoics as Thrasea Paetus and Seneca himself, who staged their own deaths as exhibitions of constancy designed to sum up and manifest the virtues by which they had lived.

Death, in a sense, is the ultimate form of constancy, which makes one absolutely immovable and unchanging, which (in Cleopatra's words)
⁷⁷
 "shackles accidents and bolts up change." To die "constantly" is not merely to face the moment of dying with unflinching resolution, but also to die in a way that is consistent with one's life as a whole, and so to fix one's virtue, perfect and unchanging, for posterity.

Nowhere are Shakespeare's Romans more Stoic than in their attitude to death and suicide. There are some ten or eleven suicides in the plays, and no character (except Brutus in a confused and self-contradictory
⁷⁸
 passage) ever suggests moral criticism of the act. Cassius praises it, in very Senecan tones, as an escape from tyranny:

Nor stony tower, nor walls of beaten brass,
 Nor airless dungeon, nor strong links of iron,
 Can be retentive to the strength of spirit;
 But life, being weary of these worldly bars,
 Never lacks power to dismiss itself.

Cleopatra, under the influence of a Roman thought, speaks in the same way: suicide is "what's brave, what's noble"; "it is great / To do that thing that ends all other deeds...." Equally clear, especially in Julius Caesar, is the Stoic death-wish. Cassius, like Seneca, speaks of being "weary" of life as a reason for suicide. Brutus easily assents to Casca's sophistical argument that death, which cuts off "so many years of fearing death," is really "a benefit"; and he finally embraces death with a weary relief which suggests it is a long-desired release from the strain of

life: "My bones would rest, / That have but labour'd to attain this
 79
 hour." His words imply the teleological fallacy, but with a distinctive
 tone of resignation and futility. Shakespeare could have taken from
 Plutarch his sense of suicide as a distinctively Roman act; it must, I
 believe, have been from Seneca (at whatever remove) that he took his
 awareness of the morbid fascination with and longing for death which
 underlies Roman Stoicism.

Also Senecan is the manner and motive of most of Shakespeare's Roman
 suicides. Shakespeare's Romans kill themselves, not like Romeo or Othello
 out of grief or guilt, but for the sake of dignitas, to avoid doing or
 suffering something that would destroy their self-respect. Brutus, like
 Cleopatra, "bears too great a mind" to be led in triumph through the
 streets of Rome; Cassius is ashamed "to live so long / To see my best
 friend ta'en before my face"; Eros kills himself to avoid being forced to
 80
 kill Antony - all "die well ... to flie the perill of an evill life."
 In "the posture of dying" they are able to show themselves to the world as
 they wish to be. Brutus is "found like Brutus, like himself," living and
 dying up to his reputation; Coriolanus, throwing himself on the Volscian
 swords, repudiates the name of "Boy" and proclaims himself the hero of
 Corioli; Cleopatra, by her magnificently stage-managed death, immortalises
 herself as the great queen and lover rather than as Octavius's pathetic
 victim. Suicide, for Shakespeare's Romans, is the final assertion of
 identity and constancy, a way of remaining unus idemque, "like oneself,"
 to the end. As Shakespeare clearly saw, the logical conclusion of
 Seneca's constantia sapientis, the attempt to be totally immovable and
 unchanged, is self-preservation through self-destruction.

[7] Seneca's tragedies: amoral constancy and the
Herculean hero

The theatricality of Senecan constancy, as I have suggested, makes it natural that it should find expression in Seneca's tragedies. In fact, however, the tragedies contain little of Stoic constantia sapientis as defined in the prose works. Instead they demonstrate how the ideal of constancy can become amoral, becoming applied to characters who lack Stoic virtue or wisdom in any normal sense, but who are heroic in their aspiring and defiant pursuit of selfhood.

The difference in tone between Seneca's tragedies and his ethical works is so great that they were long thought to be the work of two different Senecas. Modern criticism tends to accept that the plays rest upon the same Stoic doctrines as are expounded in the essays. Nevertheless, the Stoicism of the plays is overwhelmingly negative. They depict a world dominated by disordered passion, violence, and cruelty, in which the choric voices of Stoic rationality and virtue are almost entirely helpless. In this world there is little place for Stoic heroism. Though some characters suffer bravely, few are able to rise above suffering with the heroic invulnerability of the constant sapiens. Dramatic power and heroic stature belong rather to the passionate, dynamic evil characters, and it is they, rather than the virtuous victims, who are associated with constancy.

We can see this pattern clearly in Thyestes, which deals with the hideous revenge taken by Atreus against his brother Thyestes. Thyestes is an imperfect Stoic, who at first rejects his son's praises of kingship with Stoic wisdom about the worthlessness of worldly power:

PHYLISTHENES. ...You may O father raygne.

THYESTES.

I may but then when die I mought.

PHYLISTHENES. Chief thing is powre.

THYESTES. Nought worth at all, if thou desyre it
nought.⁸⁴

He declares from his experience of both that ill fortune is preferable to good, and that "Greate kin[g]dome is to be content, without the same to live."⁸⁵ Yet Thyestes' lack of constancy is betrayed by his faltering step and shifting gaze. He lets himself be persuaded to place his trust in "things unsure / Thy brother and the kingdome," putting himself in the power of fortune and abandoning the greatness of Stoic self-sufficiency,⁸⁶ and so ends in utter misery and despair.

Thyestes' weakness and failure to remain constant to his principles are contrasted with the strength of the villain Atreus. Atreus is possessed by hatred, yet, although he ought by Stoic theory to be a storm-tossed victim of his own passions, he shows a kind of insane constancy in evil. Nothing deters him from his chosen course of revenge, not even the terrifying omens as he prepares to sacrifice his nephews:

The woode then quakt, and all at once from trembling
grounde anone
The Pallace beckt, in doubt which way the payse thereof
would fall,
And shaking as in waves it stood
The sights amas'de all other men, but stedfast yet alway
Of mynde, unmoved Atreus stands, and even the Gods
doth fray
That threaten him...

Unmoved "when all the sway of earth / Shakes like a thing unfirm," Atreus takes on the qualities of the sapiens whose immovable constancy in adversity puts even the gods to shame.⁸⁷

Other Senecan villains show the same distorted image of Stoic constancy. Medea, for instance, in dialogue with her nurse, speaks like a Stoic heroine:

MEDEA. Fortune fears the brave, the cowardly overwhelms.
 NURSE. If there is place for courage, then should it be approved.
 MEDEA. It can never be that for courage there is no place.
 NURSE. No hope points out a way for our broken fortunes.
 MEDEA. Whoso has naught to hope, let him despair of naught.⁸⁸

Told that she has lost her husband, her power, her wealth, and has nothing left, she replies, "Medea is left" (Medea superest). Her selfhood, her integrity of soul, is outside the reach of fortune - "Fortune can take away my wealth, but not my spirit" - and if that is intact, nothing else matters. When the nurse protestingly cries, "Medea," she cuts in, "Will I be" (Fiam): I will be, I will become Medea, become truly like myself when everything else is stripped away from me. It is the purest declaration of Stoic constancy, though it leads to madness and murder.⁸⁹

Seneca presumably had no intention of turning such evil or mad characters into Stoic heroes. Atreus, Medea, Clytemnestra, Phaedra and the rest are conceived as characters ruinously mastered by their emotions. Yet he repeatedly depicts them in ways which recall the ideal of the constant wise man. In Senecan Stoicism, as R. J. Kaufmann puts it, "a concern for authenticity of self becomes primary, though this tendency ... creates major structural tensions in its conflict with Stoic quietism." The Stoic ideal of self-consistency "makes the oblivious monomaniac as eligible for heroism as the more selfless man, perhaps more so."⁹⁰ Seneca cannot resist glorifying characters who are constant in their selfhood, even when they are in every other respect totally opposed to Stoic virtue.

No character in Seneca's tragedies approximates more closely to the ideal of the Stoic hero than Hercules in Hercules furens and Hercules Oetaeus.⁹¹ Hercules was a traditional hero of the Stoics, as "Contemner of pleasures, Fortune, and circumstance, selfless benefactor pro bono publico, victor over all terrors, and exemplar of aspiration for the highest virtue...."⁹² In the tragedies he displays these qualities, but he is a very different kind of Stoic hero from the sapiens of the prose

works: not passive, calm, and enduring, but active, violent, passionate, physically as well as spiritually aspiring.

Hercules can be seen as a translation into literal, physical terms of the qualities attributed metaphorically to the moral state of the sapiens. In Hercules Oetaeus the chorus of Hercules' captives sing of him as rocklike ("What Scythian crag ... begot thee?") and invulnerable to physical weapons:

By no wounds may his limbs be assailed; iron he feels blunt, steel is too dull; upon his naked body swords are broken, and stones rebound; and so he scorns the fates, and with body all invincible defies mortality.

He is invincible and omnipotent: "With his bare hands did he o'erthrow Oechalia's walls, and naught can stand against him; for whatever he plans to overcome is overcome already." His inflexible countenance terrifies all enemies into surrender. The invulnerability and superiority to external forces of the sapiens are here made literal. The effect, however - especially as conveyed through the complaints of Hercules' enemies and victims - is grotesque and disturbing, like Shakespeare's similar picture of Coriolanus as an unstoppable force in battle.⁹³

Turned from a metaphor of spiritual strength into a literal, physical superman, the Stoic hero becomes a disturbing and morally ambiguous figure. Hercules Oetaeus opens with Hercules boasting in "Ercles' vein" of the great deeds by which he has destroyed all monsters and tyrants and made the world safe for humanity, and demanding that Jupiter admit him to heaven as a god: "I ask thee not to show the way to me; but grant thy permission, father, and the way I'll find."⁹⁴ This is the ultimate embodiment of Stoic aspiration, the claim of the good man to become godlike through his own virtue. In the scenes which follow, however, Hercules' wife and his women captives present a very different view of him as arrogant, cruel, lecherous, wantonly destructive. The two views are

given equal weight: Hercules is both the benefactor of mankind and a violent killer and rapist. How are we to judge him? He seems almost a figure beyond good and evil, to whom normal human moral judgements are not applicable.

Hercules attains a more orthodox kind of Stoic heroism in his enormously prolonged death scene. Poisoned by the "shirt of Nessus," he succumbs first to rage, murdering the innocent messenger Lichas, then to an agony of pain mixed with shame at his ignominious death; the chorus laments that Hercules, once "harder than Thracian Haemus' crags, than Parrhasian skies more calm" (again the two characteristic Senecan images),⁹⁵ is overcome by suffering. But his "virtue, conscious of its fame" (laudis conscia virtus) is calmed when he discovers that his death was contrived not by his wife but by the dead Nessus:

...such end was meet, that no living thing might conquer Hercules.
Now let me choose a death glorious, renowned, illustrious, full
worthy of myself [me digna]. This day will I make famous.⁹⁶

The remaining 500-odd lines of the play depict Hercules' careful contrivance, in the ultimate Stoic suicide, of a death "worthy of himself". Heroic death "will make me seem worthy of the stars," for "Worthless is all that has been done" up till now: death, by the Stoic teleological fallacy, far outweighs in significance everything done in life. His death in the pyre on Mount Oeta is a conscious exhibition of heroic constancy: "Midst scorching heat and threat'ning flames, unmoved [immotus], unshaken [inconcussus], to neither side turning his tortured limbs, he encourages, advises, is active still, though all aflame" - until at last "he deemed that courage enough had been shown in death" and⁹⁷ strides into the heart of the flames to die. Thus, having shown his constancy, his superiority to pain and death, and his ability to remain like himself to the end, he is worthy to attain godhead, and the play ends

with his ascent to the stars.

Seneca's Hercules, especially in his death, embodies the aspirations of Senecan Stoicism - though, judged by normal human standards, he must appear a self-obsessed megalomaniac. He shows what happens when these aspirations - to absolute self-consistency, absolute immovability, absolute power over fortune, godlike self-perfection - are taken to their logical conclusion. In the process, constancy becomes detached from normal Stoic moral values, and "authenticity of self" becomes an end in itself.

This kind of amoral constancy descended from Senecan tragedy into Elizabethan drama. Critics such as Eugene Waith, Hardin Craig, Henry W. Wells, and Peter Ure have traced the fascination of the Elizabethans with the "Herculean hero," the "Senecal man," the "tragedy of titanism": with morally ambiguous villain-heroes - Tamburlaine, Faustus, Bussy, Byron, Sejanus, Vindice, Richard III, Antony, Coriolanus - of overweening pride, will and ambition, who seek to be like themselves in spite of opposition or of conventional morality. ⁹⁸ In the Roman plays we can see this kind of heroism with increasing clarity in Julius Caesar, with his godlike ambitions; in Coriolanus, "constant" to the point of destroying his country; and (most complicatedly) in Antony, scarcely Stoic but insistently compared to Hercules, who pursues his true self through deeds of splendid folly and rage. This ideal bears little resemblance to the Stoic constancy pursued by a character like Brutus, but it is equally Senecan and equally a product of the basic ideal of constancy.

[8] Shakespeare and Senecan constancy

Whether or not Shakespeare was directly acquainted with Seneca's ethical writings, his conception of Roman virtue is fundamentally influenced by the idea of Stoic constancy which Seneca formulated. His Romans are Stoic in the value they put upon rationality and self-control, on the avoidance of emotion or of the public display of emotion, on resolute endurance in adversity, and, most obviously, on the acceptance of death, if necessary self-sought, rather than loss of dignitas. The central image of Senecan constancy, that of rocklike or godlike immovability, recurs throughout the plays: in Coriolanus as "the rock, the oak not to be wind-shaken," in Cleopatra as "marble-constant," in Caesar, "constant as the northern star," and (in the most quintessentially Senecan of images) immovable and untouchable as Mount Olympus.⁹⁹

Shakespeare is sensitive to the conflicting tendencies within Seneca's ideal. He is aware of its strain of externality and public performance: his Stoic Romans are "Roman actors," striving (as Seneca at times suggests the Stoic must) to conceal the emotions and weaknesses they cannot eliminate, to appear to others to be marble-constant, and to live and die like themselves. On the other hand, he shows their genuine aspiration towards a superhuman or godlike perfection, to be raised, like the northern star, above fallible humanity and the world of change and fortune. And he is aware of the ironic conflict between the two, most poignantly seen when Coriolanus, striving to "imitate the graces of the gods," suddenly perceives himself as a "dull actor" who has forgotten his part.¹⁰⁰

The case of Coriolanus also shows how the aspiring tendency in Senecan constancy can become detached from Stoic morality and become the amoral, ruthless self-assertion of a Herculean hero-villain. This is possible

because Senecan Stoicism is essentially an individualistic ideal. The Stoic's aim is to become a sapiens, to perfect his own soul; the fact that this is indirectly "for the good of all men" is only an added justification. The ideal of Senecan constancy is not essentially a social one. It can become positively anti-social, as the individual's drive towards self-consistency and self-perfection clashes violently with the demands of society.

Constancy can, however, be differently interpreted. In the next chapter I shall turn to Cicero's version of the ideal: a social, public-spirited, Roman Stoicism in which, through the concepts of officia and decorum, the Stoic virtue of constancy is turned into the consistent performance of a social role.

CHAPTER THREE

CICERO AND THE ROMAN ACTORS

[1] Introduction

If Seneca defines Stoic virtue for posterity, Cicero may be said to define "Roman virtue" - a concept even more important in the Renaissance.¹ Cicero - though not himself a Stoic, and indeed critical of the more extreme claims of constantia sapientis - drew heavily upon Stoic ethics in his attempts to popularise and Romanise Greek philosophy; he is the spokesman for a moderate and public-spirited Roman version of Stoicism which places all its emphasis on the social virtues, and inculcates courage, temperance, honour and duty in the service of Rome. In his most influential work, De officiis, a manual of civic virtue, he develops the idea of "decorum": virtue as the consistent playing of a role which is appropriate to oneself, human nature, and one's society. Shakespeare, I shall argue, knew De officiis, took from it much of his understanding of Roman virtue, and, in particular, was fascinated by the moral problems involved in decorum and its relationship with Stoic constancy.

The influence of Cicero's philosophical works can hardly be overrated. Though they have little claim to originality, they have survived where their Greek sources are lost, and their eloquence made them accepted as epitomes of the best form of classical virtue. In particular De officiis - Tully's Offices, as it was known in Renaissance England - has

been called "arguabl[y] ... the most influential secular prose work ever written," and was in the sixteenth century second only to the Bible as a source of moral wisdom.² T. W. Baldwin has shown that De officiis, usually in a collection with several of Cicero's shorter works, was the standard text for moral instruction in the upper forms of Elizabethan grammar schools. If Shakespeare attended grammar school (and Baldwin's study seems to render this certain), he must have studied De officiis in Latin, and probably also seen Nicholas Grimalde's 1553 translation.³

Shakespeare's reading of De officiis in his schooldays must have helped to shape his idea of Rome: as a society whose life was public and political, whose Roman virtues (courage, temperance, justice, honour, gravity) were self-consciously and publicly exercised, and which saw virtue as the conscious and consistent playing of a public role. His conception of Romans as actors derives ultimately, in my view, from Cicero's account of decorum in De officiis I. In writing the Roman plays, Shakespeare is interested both in the similarities and differences between Stoic constancy and Ciceronian decorum, and also in the tensions within Cicero's own ethics: between Stoic absolutism and concern for public opinion, between individual heroic virtue and social utility, between self-knowledge and the playing of a public role.

Although my main concern is with Cicero's discussion of decorum, it is necessary to put these passages into context. The next two sections, therefore, provide a view of Cicero's philosophical position, looking first at his ethical debate with the Stoics concerning (chiefly) their claim of absolute indifference to external evils, and then at the "public temper" of his concept of virtue. The latter half of the chapter will then look in more detail at De officiis I, concentrating on the two sections most relevant to constancy: the discussions of courage (magnitudo animi) and of decorum.

[2] Stoic and sceptic: Cicero's debate with the Stoics

The ambiguity of Cicero's attitude to Stoicism has meant that, while he is often casually referred to as a Stoic writer, he can also be seen as a founder of the "anti-Stoic" tradition.⁴ To see how much truth there is⁵ in both views, it is necessary to define his philosophical position.

Cicero studied in his youth under all three of the main contemporary schools of philosophy: Stoic, Epicurean, and Academic. Perhaps because of his readiness, as an orator and lawyer, "to see both sides of a question,"⁶ he was most attracted towards the scepticism of the New Academy. The Academics taught that certain knowledge was impossible, and that the only attitude proper to a philosopher was suspension of judgement. They were thus opposed to all dogmatic schools, and in particular to the Stoics. Stoicism draws an absolute line between truth and falsehood, and knowledge and opinion; it holds that the sapiens, at least, can infallibly distinguish truth from falsehood, on the basis of a certain quality of "clearness" possessed only by true sense-impressions. Consequently, error must arise from either negligence or wilful blindness - a view which is reflected in Stoic morality. The Academics, by contrast, stress the difficulty of perceiving truth and the danger of making erroneous decisions. Decisions must be made on the basis, not of dogmatic certainty, but of probability. In Cicero's view, though certainty is impossible, it is possible to arrive at an approximation of the truth by a rational calculation of probabilities. Being an Academic, he declares, does not prevent him from holding opinions and maintaining them as probable, but only from claiming them as dogmatic certainties.⁷

As a result of his scepticism, Cicero maintains a position of

philosophical independence and eclecticism, willing to take doctrines
 which seem probable from any school. He contrasts this open-mindedness
 with the rigidity of more dogmatic philosophers (such as the Stoics)

which bynde them selves to anye certayne opinion, as men wholye
 gyven to the same, so that sumtimes they are constrayned, to get
 theym opinion of constancie [constantiae causa], to maynteyne such
 thynges, as otherwyse they woulde not allowe. But I who in al
 thinges folowe probabilitie, and can go no further then
 likelyhode, am readye both to wryte agaynst others without any⁹
 stubbernes, and also to be writen agaynst, without anye anger.

By constantia Cicero primarily means "(philosophical) consistency"; yet
 John Dolman's translation may not be entirely inaccurate in implying the
 moral sense of the word. The Stoics, Cicero implies, are fixed in their
 rigid intellectual positions, and as unwilling to be moved by argument as
 by adversity.

Academics and Stoics, despite their differences, agree on the moral
 importance of problems of knowledge, opinion, and judgement. Cicero,
 influenced by both schools, is doubly conscious of this problem; as we
 shall see in the next section, he is preoccupied, in a way both Stoic and
 sceptical, with the dangers of an unthinking acceptance of public opinion.
 He advises in De officiis that in the pursuit of wisdom we must be careful

that we take not thinges, we knowe not, as though we knewe them, &
 rashlie assent to them. Which fault whoso will eschew (and all
 ought to be willing) must employ to the considering of maters both
 leasure, & diligence.¹⁰

Cicero's scepticism, and his insistence on the moral duty of being
 sceptical, are reflected in the characterisation of him in Julius Caesar.
 Shakespeare's Cicero treats Casca's report of the prodigies of the storm
 with cool common sense, refuses to be drawn into stating his opinion of
 their meaning, and sums up:

men may construe things after their fashion,
Clean from the purpose of the things themselves.

In view of the importance of "construing" and error in the events of the
play, this is a crucial choric comment.¹¹

Cicero's moral debate with the Stoics centres upon their belief that virtue alone is "good" and on its own can bring happiness. This belief is fundamental to the Senecan ideal of heroic constancy: it justifies the absolute Stoic dichotomy between internal and external states, and the claim that the sapiens can be entirely unmoved and unharmed by external events.

Cicero's most extended treatment of this question is in De finibus bonorum et malorum.¹² In Book III of this dialogue Cato (the later martyr of Utica) expounds the basic principles of Stoic ethics, and defends the Stoic view that virtue is the sole good against the Aristotelian view that external things such as health and prosperity are also "good." If this latter view is accepted, Cato points out, pain and suffering must in some degree detract from happiness, and "the Wise Man cannot be happy when he is being tortured on the rack" - as, according to the Stoic system, he can.¹³ The absolute constancy of the Stoic hero is possible only if one accepts the basic premisses of Stoicism.

In Book IV Cicero mounts an attack on these views. For him, the unrealistic absurdity of the idea of the wise man happy upon the rack typifies what is wrong with Stoic ethics: "self-deception, an obsession with names and an ignorance of reality."¹⁴ The Stoics' preoccupation with sterile word-juggling (inanitas verborum) blinds them to reality and common sense; as Seneca's interlocutor objects in De constantia sapientis,¹⁵ they are contending merely for "an imaginative honour of words." Their supersubtle syllogisms and paradoxes make sense only if one takes words

like "good" and "bad" in the special private sense in which the Stoics use them. Such theories "could not possibly be produced in civic life, in the law courts, in the senate!" If the city was about to be sacked, could the Stoic stand up in a public meeting to explain that there was really¹⁶ nothing to worry about, since death and exile are not really "bad"? The Stoics cut themselves off from communication with ordinary people, and, in doing so, fail to achieve the end of philosophy, to persuade people to virtue. "Their meagre little syllogisms [interrogatiunculis angustis] are mere pin-pricks; even if they convince the intellect, they cannot convert the heart, and the hearer goes away no better than he came" (a comment¹⁷ that seems relevant to the failure of Brutus' Forum speech).

The same impatience with a sterile and unrealistic intellectualism lies behind Cicero's more fundamental criticisms of Stoic ethics. He attacks the absolute Stoic dichotomy between internal and external, soul and body. The Stoics start from the axiom that we have a natural and innate desire for physical well-being; how, he demands, do they get from there to the conclusion that virtue is the sole good? "By what means or at what point did you suddenly discard the body...?" Stoic morality is designed for a disembodied mind, some unimaginable creature with no physical needs whatsoever. Man, however, consists both of a mind and a body, and even if we grant that the mind is the more important and more distinctively human part, still the body cannot simply be ignored; this is not, as the Stoics claim, to "follow nature," but to abandon its most¹⁸ basic precept, the desire for self-preservation. Philosophy's task is to perfect humanity, but it must do so by improving upon Nature's basic design, not by scrapping that design and trying something quite different. "[O]ur course is to inquire what Nature's handiwork has been in man - the¹⁹ whole man." The Stoics, who ignore man's physical nature, are as unbalanced as the Epicureans, who treat man as a mere animal without a

mind. Theirs is not a morality for human beings.

This unrealistic absolutism, Cicero argues, renders Stoic ethics useless in practice. Their lumping together of "indifferent" things gives no practical guidance as to how to discriminate between them; their view of virtue and vice as absolute states without gradation leads to the absurd view that a man on the verge of being a sapiens is no better morally than the worst of criminals. The fundamental flaw in their ethics is pride: gloriosa ostentatio, an arrogant desire to show off, which leads them to pitch their moral claims so high that no human being can in fact live up to them.

Book IV of De finibus is thus a devastating attack on the basis of Stoic ethics; its criticisms are to reappear in later anti-Stoic writings.²¹ In Book V, however, Cicero goes a long way to qualify, if not entirely retract, this attack. The speaker Piso here argues, much as Cicero had done in Book IV, that virtue is the chief but not the only good.²² When he has spoken, however, Cicero (exercising his Academic privilege of freedom of judgement) completely reverses his earlier position to criticise Piso's arguments from a Stoic point of view. Where he earlier ridiculed the Stoic claim that the wise man could be happy on the rack, he now criticises the Antiochean view precisely because - as Cato earlier pointed out - it denies this possibility. If, as Antiochus says, health, prosperity, and so on are "good," then the person who lacks them must be in some measure unhappy, and so his claim that virtue can bring happiness falls down; whereas for the Stoics a man who is "at once blind, infirm, afflicted by dire disease, in exile, childless, destitute and tortured on the rack," but who is virtuous, can be not only happy, but "supremely happy." Ordinary people may regard such a claim as self-evidently absurd, but philosophers must admit that it is at least logically consistent.²³ Given Stoic assumptions, a man can really command

happiness at will, simply by learning to be virtuous - a claim more moderate and sensible philosophies cannot consistently make.

Cicero's apparent support for the Stoics here is ambiguously edged with irony, and Piso is allowed a partly convincing reply. Nevertheless, De finibus ends with the debate essentially unresolved. Cicero seems divided between mockery of the Stoics' pretensions, and a desire to believe in them.²⁴

Cicero returns to the debate, on a more personal level, in Book V of the Tusculan Disputations, which also discusses whether "virtue is sufficient of it selfe, to the mayntayning of a happy and a blessed life."²⁵ The discussion is dedicated to Brutus, who firmly upholds the Stoic view. Cicero declares his earnest wish to be able to prove it true, since the end and justification of philosophy has always been "a blessed life." If, however, virtue "beinge subjecte, to sundrye and uncertayne chaunces, is the slave of fortune, and not of sufficiente ability, to mayntayne her selfe," then we may as well stop relying on virtue to obtain happiness and start offering up prayers instead.²⁶ Cicero the Roman sceptic probably intends this as a bitter joke, but it unintentionally sums up the main point of conflict between Stoicism and Christianity: should man hope to attain happiness by his own unaided efforts or by divine grace?

Cicero confesses that he finds himself doubtful, especially in his own present misfortunes (he means his enforced exile from politics during Caesar's dictatorship, and the recent death of his beloved daughter), of the power of virtue to achieve happiness.

I beginne to mistruste this opinion, and to feare, the weakenes, and frayletye of mankynde. For, I am wonte to feare, least, inasmuch as, nature hath geven us weake bodyes, to the whyche also, she hath fastned sundrye sortes of incurable diseases, & intollerable grieves: least, she (I say) hath likewise geven us mindes, agreable to the diseases & greves of our body. And also of them selves, wrapped in other severall cares & troubles.

But (he continues) he recognises that these doubts proceed from his own weakness, not that of virtue:

For vertue trulye (if there be anye such thing at all, whyche doubt, if there were any, your fathers brother [i.e. Cato] (O Brutus) hath already taken away) hath undoubtedly, all chaunces whych may happen to man, in subjection under it: and despysing theym, contempneth all worldly casualtye: and, beyng it selfe, voyde of all blame,²⁷ thinketh, that nothing besides it it selfe, is requisite unto it.

Cicero thus asserts the absolute power of virtue and (hence) the possibility of heroic constancy, not so much on the basis of rational argument, but of the practical examples provided by Roman Stoics like Brutus and Cato. In the body of Tusculans V he defends this Stoic position, and finally sums it up in a characteristically hedging way:

"Thus you have that, whyche I thynke to be moost stoutelye spoken, of a blessed and happy life. And (as the case standeth) unlesse you can bryng²⁸ any prooffe, that also, which is as trulye spoken, as it may be." It seems clear that his anxiety on this point is genuine, not a rhetorical fiction, and that his assertion of the Stoic view is willed: he believes in the possibility of constancy because he wants to believe in it.

Cicero finally leans towards Stoic ethics because, in the words of A. E. Douglas, "Stoicism alone of the rival schools of Cicero's time, met what seemed to ancient thought one general all-important requirement in any definition of the 'good life,' namely self-sufficiency." If virtue alone is sufficient for happiness, this is a guarantee that happiness is possible and can be attained by unaided human effort; the sapiens can rise above any external adversities to be constant, tranquil, and immovable in all circumstances. In the end, despite his scepticism, Cicero is swayed to Stoicism by his need to believe in the self-sufficiency of virtue, the Stoic desire to "stand / As if a man were author of himself."²⁹

Despite his anti-Stoic criticisms, therefore, it is possible to regard Cicero's moral works (especially De officiis and the Tusculan Disputations)³⁰ as essentially Stoic. The ethical framework of these works is Stoic, and, despite occasional criticisms and modifications, so is the content; the account of emotions in Tusculans IV, for example, is almost pure Stoicism.

Nevertheless, there is a distinctively Roman and public quality in Cicero's Stoicism which makes it very different in tone from Seneca's. It is to these differences - the "public temper" of Cicero's ethics - that I turn in the next section.

[3] Roman virtue and the public temper

In Cicero's ethics, the moral absolutism and aspiration towards the superhuman of Senecan Stoicism are balanced by a more moderate, practical, public-spirited, Roman code of values. Cicero's brand of Roman virtue is appropriate to the "public temper of Rome" (in Eliot's phrase) in placing its heaviest emphasis on social and political life, on publicly exercised virtues, and on public opinion and its sanctions. This emphasis, however, leads to an unresolved conflict in Cicero between the individualistic ideal of Stoic constancy, and the inconstant demands of the public good and public opinion.

Writing to popularise Greek philosophy for his Roman contemporaries, Cicero repeatedly underlines the similarity between philosophical teaching and traditional Roman practice: the spirit of Rome is Stoic. In the introduction to the Tusculan Disputations he argues that the Romans have shown greater wisdom than the Greeks:

For in maners, orders of livinge, and maynteyning of householde: We truly behave our selves both farre better than they, and also more liberall. And as for the comen wealth, our forefathers have governed it, with much more politike orders and lawes. What should I saye of warfare? in the which our countreyemen passed trulye in manhode [virtus], but much more in pollecy. But as for the giftes of Nature, and such thinges as they might attaine unto without learning: neyther the Greekes, neyther yet any other nation, may well be compared with them. For, what so greate gravitye? what so notable constancye? stoutnesse of stomacke [magnitudo animi], honestye? or truste, what so passinge vertue in all kynde of poyntes, hath bene found in any nation? that it may for the same be compared withoure auncesters?³¹

Gravitas, constantia, magnitudo animi - these are the virtues of Stoic ethics. The Greeks may have written more eloquently of such virtues, Cicero suggests, but the Romans have practiced them. Cicero continually supports his moral arguments with exempla drawn sometimes from Greek, but more often from Roman history: names such as Decius, Mucius, Cato, Marcellus, Scipio and Laelius recur, as examples of courage, patriotism, self-sacrifice, and just government.

Such examples serve not only to increase the appeal of philosophy to a Roman audience, but also to demonstrate that these ideals are practical, and have been practiced by the most admired Roman soldiers and statesmen. So, arguing the Stoic view that pain is not an evil (a doctrine which, as we have seen, he elsewhere treats sceptically), Cicero cites Regulus,

as no meane witnes, but (I beleve) the gravest of all. For what more substantiall wytnesse do we looke for, than a pere of the commonweale [principem populi Romani], who, for the continuing of hys duetie, did wyllinglie enter into tormentes?³²

Roman practice is more telling than any philosophical argument.

In adapting Stoicism into a code of Roman virtue, Cicero makes it essentially a morality for "peers of the commonwealth." Public life is the arena of morality, and the good of one's country is the supreme goal. This is perhaps most clearly seen in the Somnium Scipionis (a popular work

in the Renaissance), in which Scipio Africanus dreams of an after-life reserved for statesmen and patriots:

all those who have preserved, aided, or enlarged their fatherland have a special place prepared for them in the heavens, where they may enjoy an eternal life of happiness. For nothing of all that is done on earth is more pleasing to that supreme God who rules the whole universe than the assemblies and gatherings of men associated in justice, which are called States. ³³

Whereas traditional Stoicism, as reflected in Seneca, has a strain of ascetic withdrawal from the world, Cicero strongly asserts that virtue can only be fully exercised in public life. As we shall see later in looking at his treatment of courage in De officiis, he strongly criticises those who withdraw from public life in search of philosophical enlightenment, and comes very close to asserting that the sole purpose and justification of virtue is its contribution to the good of society.

Cicero, of course, put these principles into practice: he was not only a philosopher, but also a politician and an orator. The coexistence of these roles in the most famous of Roman writers must have contributed to the stereotype of Rome as a society dominated by politics and public speaking. In particular, the importance of oratory to Cicero draws attention to the importance of public opinion in Rome and in his philosophy.

As we have seen, the Stoics, following Socrates and Plato, draw a sharp distinction between true knowledge, based on right reason, and mere opinion, swayed by passion and caprice. As reliance on opinion corrupts the soul, so public opinion - the opinion of the proverbially fickle and inconstant populace - is a corrupting force in society. A person who relies upon the opinions of others, especially of the crowd, cannot be wise; most of all he cannot be constant, for one cannot be "always the same" and unmoved if one is continually being swayed by shifting and unstable popular opinion. Symptomatic of this view is the Platonic

condemnation of oratory, the art which has as its aim the moulding of popular opinion. Oratory is to philosophy as opinion is to knowledge; it appeals to passion and prejudice and to our readiness to continually change our minds.

Cicero is of course well aware of this distinction: as he points out in the introduction to Tusculans II, oratory "is an art applicable to the common voice of the people, & the very end and perfection of eloquence, is the praise and commendation of the hearers," whereas "philosophy seeks not the judgement or praise of manye, but of purpose flies the praise of the common people."³⁴ However, he continues to treat the two activities as equally valuable, and suggests (perhaps tongue-in-cheek) that Plato would have made a fine orator and Demosthenes a fine philosopher.³⁵ In De oratore, a popular work in the Renaissance,³⁶ the speaker Crassus explicitly disagrees with Plato's condemnation of oratory, and exalts his ideal orator over the philosophers with their aridly technical and airily theoretical arguments.³⁷ The ideal of De oratore is the orator-statesman: the public speaker who is also a good and wise man, learned in philosophy and the arts and sciences, experienced in practical politics, wisely guiding public opinion for the good of the state. Cicero thus minimises the Platonic distinction between philosophy and oratory, and the kinds of truth or knowledge they deal with. It is significant that in De finibus he criticises the Stoics for neglecting oratory, and dismisses their doctrines on the grounds that they could not convincingly be defended at a public meeting. Such an equation of truth with what an audience can be made to believe suggests the extent to which Cicero, like Shakespeare's Romans,³⁸ blurs the Platonic/Stoic line between knowledge and opinion.

The ethical problems involved in this kind of public morality are most clearly seen in Cicero's treatment of honour, glory, and fame. Should the good man seek public praise and recognition, or despise them?

Cicero's attitude is thoroughly ambivalent. In one context he can declare that popular favour is worthless, and praise Democritus as a "constante man, and a grave" for rejecting it and glorying in having no glory: "Is there any thing more foolysh? then, that those, whom takyng one and one, you despise as slaves and fooles, to thinke (I saye) that those altogither are any better? But a wise man ... will despise all honoure, though it be profered unto him."³⁹ In another, he can demand respect for the opinions of all men, not only of the best: "For it is not onelye a signe of an arrogante bodye, but also of one altogyther lawlesse, to be rechles, what every man thinketh of him."⁴⁰

Cicero's most extended treatment of this problem, in Tusculans II, is complicated by the ambiguity of the key word honestum, which is Cicero's term for "the Good" or "moral virtue," but also means "honourable" or "honoured," so that the two concepts are often impossible to separate. In fact, part of Cicero's purpose seems to be to bring them together, and to associate Stoic virtue with the desire for honour and glory. He argues that contempt for pain can only be taught by the Stoics, "whyche thinke that whiche is honest, to be the chiefest good In theyr presence trulye, thou durste not syghe, nor yet to bragge of such trifles." They teach that endurance of pain is not unnatural; on the contrary, there is nothing nature more demands

then honesty, then prayse, then dignitie, then worship. By these divers names, I meane but one thinge. But I use them to shewe the thing more evidently by many names. But my meaninge is this, that that thing, is farre above al other most convenient for eche man, which is to be desyred for it selfe: as a thing eyther issuynge out of vertue, or els beyng it selfe placed amonges some one of the vertues, and of his owne nature prayse worthy. Which trulie, I would rather terme the singuler and onelye, then the chiefest or greatest good.⁴¹

Cicero's profusion of explanatory synonyms in fact confuses rather than clarifies what he is talking about, since all of them - honestas, laus,

dignitas, decus - have strong connotations of honour and reputation as well as of simple virtue. The reward of courageous endurance is not merely virtue itself but the glory of being seen to be virtuous, while the deterrent against cowardice is shame ("thou durste not syghe").

Cicero attempts to define the nature of true honour and its relationship with public opinion in a complex passage in the Tusculan Disputations, in which Cicero's Stoicism and his Academic scepticism seem to meet. Cicero argues that our moral failings arise from our inability to discern nature clearly. We are born with only a few sparks of divine reason and knowledge in us,

which with noughtye fashions & erronious opinions we doe lyghtelye quenche, in such wise, that not so much as any glymse of the lyghte of nature can appeare. ...as soone as we are borne & brought foorth into this light we are forthwith continuallye trayned in al noughtinesse and perverse opinions, so that it maye well be sayd, that even with the milke of our nurses, we do sucke error.

First our parents, then our schoolteachers, then the poets we are taught to read, teach us their prejudices and false beliefs. Finally the most powerful teacher of all, public opinion, "the commen voice of the multitude," completes our flight from the light of nature into "erronious opinions" by instilling into us the most dangerous and plausible fallacy: "that nothing is more necessary, more to be desired, or coveted then honour, empire & the praise of the common people." Most men, including the best [optimus quisque], take this ideal of honour for true virtue, but they

are foulye deluded and mocked. For they do not obtayne any perfect picture of vertue, but the shaded image of glorye. For, true glorye is a sounde and perfect thyng, and no coloured shadowe. And that is the incorrupted and universall prayse, of al good men, proceeding of the right report of the excellencie of vertue. ... Which inasmuch as commonly it foloweth al good deeds, is not to be refused nor despysed of such, as are good men. But

it which will needes be an imitatour of the same (the comen brute [i.e. bruit, fame] of the people I meane) is often time rashe, unadvised, and most commonly a commender of vice, and naughtines, and under the shape of honestie, stayneth the forme and beauty of unfayned glorye. With the ignoraunce of the whyche mens mindes beyng blynded, and coveting alwayes to do some fact, wherby they myghte be renowned [cum quaedam ... praeclara cuperent], knoweing not neverthelesse, how or whych waye they might perfourme the same, have fallen into great inconvenience. For some have rased theyr owne cities and some have slayne them selves.⁴²

Cicero's treatment of "opinion" in this passage, as a morally corrupting force which blinds us to the truths of reason and nature, is purely Stoic. He also conveys, however, an un-Stoic sense of the inevitability of such corruption. In a world of illusion and confusion, where we drink in error with our nurses' milk, it is hard or impossible to perceive and hold to the truth. This is not the world of Stoic epistemology, where we have an instant instinctive comprehension of truth; it owes much more to Academic scepticism and Cicero's insistence "that we take not things, we knowe not, as though we knewe them." His scepticism, and his own ambivalence about opinion and honour, give him an awareness of the complexity of moral problems which seems foreign to the more orthodox Stoicism of Seneca.

The difficulty of perceiving truth in a world dominated by opinion, and the destructive power of "hateful error," are major themes of Shakespeare's Roman plays. These moral problems are sharpened by the nature of Shakespeare's Rome as a society dominated by "opinion," echoing with oratory and rhetoric, preoccupied with honour and the making and moulding of public judgements, neglectful of self-knowledge. In this society public opinion displaces truth, so that even the noble philosopher Brutus believes that the appearance of the assassination "shall make / Our purpose necessary" by "so appearing to the common eyes." Shakespeare's Roman heroes are entangled in the demands of Roman society and its opinions: Brutus is "wrought" by public opinion (as manipulated by

Cassius) and his own desire for honour to murder Caesar; Coriolanus finds that the honour he seeks is defined by the "voices" and "stinking breath" of the mob he despises.⁴³ As Cicero says, they pursue virtue and honour but are confused about its nature - and so Brutus slays himself, and Coriolanus comes near to razing his own city. Shakespeare suggests, however, that these are not the isolated tragedies of misguided individuals, but a problem inherent in "Roman virtue" and its concern for public opinion and public utility rather than truth.

Cicero's concept of public Roman virtue is most fully developed in De officiis, to which I now turn. My account of it will concentrate upon Cicero's treatment of "constancy," which, of all virtues, most clearly depends upon truth rather than opinion. Cicero's attempts to reconcile constancy with the demands of society shows most clearly the potential conflicts between public virtue and individual aspirations.

[4] Officia

De officiis, Cicero's last and most influential ethical work, best epitomises his contribution to the European moral tradition: the creation on a Stoic basis of a public-spirited concept of Roman morality.

It is largely based on a (lost) work, Peri kathekontos, by the Late Stoic Panaetius of Rhodes.⁴⁴ Cicero's officia translates the Greek kathekonta, "appropriate acts": those actions which it is right and proper for a person to do, arising out of a correct choice between "indifferent" things which are to be preferred or rejected. In Stoic theory, as Cicero acknowledges, these are not to be identified with virtue. Perfect and absolute virtue can only be attained by the sapiens; the correct performance of kathekonta is merely a second-best kind of virtue (quasi

secunda quaedam honesta), by means of which ordinary human beings can achieve "semblances of honestie" (similitudines honesti esse possunt).⁴⁵

Panaetius, however, placed more emphasis upon the moral needs and duties of the man who is progressing towards virtue, and hence upon the moral significance of kathekonta.⁴⁶ Cicero, who in De finibus criticised the unreality of the Stoic dichotomy between absolute virtue and absolute vice, clearly found this more moderate approach congenial. The strict Stoic distinction (to use an analogy) is like the Calvinist doctrine of faith and works, by which you cannot claim to be virtuous unless you are one of the elect (the wise); Panaetius and Cicero, by contrast, emphasise the importance of works.⁴⁷ The effect of De officiis is to raise the status of everyday, public, social morality, and to suggest that the proper conduct of such matters is equal or even superior to a fugitive and cloistered philosophical enlightenment.

Cicero's use of the word officia underlines the public and social orientation of his ethics. As most commentators point out, the traditional translation "duties" is somewhat misleading; the sixteenth-century rendering "Tully's Offices" preserves the tone better.⁴⁸ The Greek kathekon means "appropriate," "becoming to man," "suitable to his nature and being"; it implies, that is, the central Stoic idea of harmony and consistency.⁴⁹ In translating it as officium, Cicero is borrowing a political term: the officia of a public official or a military officer are the actions he is required by his office to perform, the duties appropriate to his role.⁵⁰ The meaning is essentially the same, but the new connotations are significant. By his choice of word Cicero links the entire concept of "appropriate acts" to the idea of performing a public "office," to social roles and obligations. This suggests the central importance in the book of the concept of decorum. In dealing both with officia in general and with decorum in particular, Cicero is able to shift

the Stoic idea of consistency with nature towards the idea of playing a public role.

De officiis I is organised around the traditional four cardinal virtues: wisdom, justice, fortitude or courage, and temperance. Wisdom is handled rather briefly and perfunctorily, with a warning against allowing the pleasures of contemplation to distract us from business; the other three virtues are dealt with in much more depth, with emphasis upon their social importance.

In the sections which follow I will examine two sections of the book which are most relevant to the concept of constancy. In the first, the discussion of courage or magnitudo animi ("greatness of courage," in Grimalde's version), Cicero attempts to reconcile heroic Stoic constancy with the good of the state. In the second, the discussion (under the head of temperance) of decorum, he develops a different concept of constancy as consistency.

[5] Greatness of courage

Courage or fortitude is in Cicero's view the most glorious of the virtues, "that seems to shine brightest: which is wrought with a great, and lofty courage, despising worldly vanities [humanas...res]." Our worst insults are charges of cowardice, our highest compliments are those of courage and magnitudo animi. This is especially true of the Romans:

specially the people of Rome did exceed in greatness of courage [animi magnitudine]. And their desire of martial glory is declared: in that we see their images of honour be set up, for the most part, in warlike array.⁵²

Cicero is drawing upon the traditional Roman idea that, in Cominius' words, "valour is the chiefest virtue." In the Tusculans Cicero makes

Cominius' idea explicit: that the word virtus means both "virtue" in general and "valour" in particular, and is the pre-eminent virtue of a man⁵³ (vir).

Cicero immediately qualifies the old Roman view, however, by insisting that courage must be linked with justice, the primary social virtue. The Stoics define courage as a virtue "that fighteth in defence of equitie." Divorced from justice, it becomes merely "lewd hardinesse," and is very dangerous:

But this is odious, that in such hautinesse, and gretnesse of courage, there groweth a wilfulnesse very soone, and an overseeking of rule.... [A]s every man dothe mooste excell other in greatnesse of courage, he will likewise be the very higheste over all, or rather withoute pere. And when you covet to bee above all, it is harde to keepe an equitie, whyche is moste propre to justice. Whereof comes to passe, that they canne not abyde to bee bridled neyther with reasoning, nor with any common and rightfull ordre of lawe: and they become in the common weale for the moste parte guifte gevers, and partmakers [factiosi]: that they maie attaine to the greateste power, and be rather by myght superioure, than by justice equall.⁵⁴

The other danger is that courage may become directed towards honour and fame rather than true achievement.

But a true, and wise stoute hearte judgeth that honestie, which nature chieflie foloweth, to stande in deedes, and not in glorye: and hadde rather bee, then seeme the chiefe. For who so hangeth upon the waveringe of the unskilfull multitude, he is not to bee counted amonge the numbere of manlie menn.

Cicero admits, though, that he is on difficult ground ("a very slypper place") here. It is all very well to say that we should seek achievement rather than honour, but in fact "scarce there is anie manne founde, who when he hathe sustained travailes, and aventured daungers, doth not desire glorie, as rewarde [mercedem] of his doinges."⁵⁵

This whole passage reads like a commentary on Shakespeare's Coriolanus, the man of magnitudo animi who refuses to take "a bribe to pay

[his] sword" in the form of either wealth or glory, yet "pays himself with being proud," and so falls into the other danger of which Cicero warns: "wilfulnesse ... and an overseeking of rule."⁵⁶ Cicero is confronting one of the central problems of Coriolanus: how can magnitudo animi, which by its very nature is individualistic and immoderate, be reconciled with the good of the society which needs it? Cicero, like the Roman state of Coriolanus, is attempting to turn this Stoic quality from an individualistic into a social virtue.

This is made explicit in Cicero's subsequent definition of courage. It has two aspects. The first is Stoic wisdom and constancy of mind: the firm belief that nothing is to be valued or sought but virtue, and a refusal to be subject to any external force or passion or accident. The second, which results from the first, is courage in action, the performing of great and useful deeds, even at the cost of extreme pain, toil and danger.

All the glorye, & honour of these two thinges, I adde therto the profite [utilitatem], standes in the latter, but the cause, and meane, that makes man[ly] men, is in the former. For in it is that, whyche maketh excellent courages, and such as despise the worldes vanities.⁵⁷

Though Cicero gives equal praise to both aspects of courage, the effect of his definition is to make Stoic constantia essentially a means to an end, rather than (as for Seneca) an end in itself. It is valued for its "profite", utilitas, in encouraging men to perform brave deeds for the common good.

The pursuit of Stoic constancy for its own sake, indeed, can be as selfish and anti-social as the pursuit of power and glory through courage. As we have already noted, Cicero condemns philosophers who withdraw from public life in their desire for tranquillity of mind. They are as selfish as those driven by ambition, for, as the Stoic paradox of the sapiens as

king suggests, they "shoote at the same marke, that Kyngees doo" - absolute power and self-sufficiency.⁵⁸ For the most part (though Plato and Aristotle may perhaps be excepted) such "philosophers" are motivated by laziness and cowardice, lacking the courage and constancy which philosophy teaches. Public life is the proper sphere for such virtues: the public man, living amid passionate disputes, uncertainty and danger, needs constancy and tranquillity more than the ivory-tower philosopher:

And of suche as take upon them the common weale, no lesse than of Phylosophers, yea and I wot not whether more, muste be used bothe a majestie [magnificentia], and a contempte of worldly thinges ... and also a quietnesse of minde, and voydnesse of care: for so thei shal not be thoughtful [anxii], and with gravitie, and stedfastnesse [constantia] they shall leade theyr lyfe.⁵⁹

Cicero's ideal is a politician who has the moral qualities of a Stoic sapiens, but uses them for the good of the commonwealth rather than for his own moral perfection.

In his discussion of courage, Cicero thus attempts to bring together the Stoic ideal of magnitudo animi - unshakable constancy and calm of mind arising out of scorn for external circumstances - with the traditional Roman idea of "valour ... the chiefest virtue," and to redefine them both as a practical, public-spirited, civic virtue. He is, however, well aware of the problems involved. Both the old Roman aristocratic warrior ethic, and the ideal of the Stoic sapiens as it is presented, for instance, by Seneca, involve aspirations to individual self-advancement and individual self-perfection which are not easily reconciled with the common good of the state. Cicero sets out the problem but does not resolve it; Shakespeare, especially in Coriolanus, I believe, draws upon these unresolved contradictions.

[6] Decorum

Cicero's most elaborate treatment of the Stoic idea of constancy, and, in my view, the aspect of his thought which most profoundly influenced Shakespeare's Roman plays, is his discussion of decorum. From these passages Shakespeare took over the central image of the Roman plays, that of "our Roman actors," and also the hints for his deeper exploration of the conflicts between social role and individual character.

Decorum is Cicero's rendering of the Greek prepon. It is a difficult word to define, or to translate into English: Grimalde renders it as "comeliness" or that which "becomes," the Loeb translation as "propriety" or that which is "proper." It means that which is right, fitting and appropriate for, or consistent with the nature of, a person or thing. It is, in other words, an aspect of the concept of homologia, harmony or consistency, which is for the Stoics the basic guiding principle of morality. Cicero explains this earlier in De officiis, describing the characteristically human ability to perceive the order of the world:

And that truly is no small power of nature & reason, that this creature onely perceives what is order: what it is, that becommeth [deceat] in dedes, and words: & what is measure. And therefore, of those same things which bee discerned by sight, no other creature perceiveth the beautie, the grace, and the proportion of parts[.] Which f[or]me, nature and reason conveying from the yies to the minde, dothe more judge a beautie, a stedfastnes [constantiam], & an order in counselles, & dedes fit to bee observed....⁶⁰

Panaetius apparently developed this ancient idea by laying more stress upon individuality and the need to act in a way harmonious and consistent with one's individual character.⁶¹

Cicero admits that the nature of decorum is easier to grasp than explain. It is inseparably linked with virtue: "both what becommeth is honest and also what is honest, becommeth."⁶² In general, it is whatever

is appropriate to or in harmony with the nature of a human being, and so can be applied to any of the virtues. Specifically, it is the quality

which is so to nature agreeable, as it may appere both in mesurableness, and temperaunce, with a certaine honest show. [quod ita naturae consentaneum est, ut in eo moderatio et temperantia appareat cum specie quadam liberali.]⁶³

This rather cloudy definition suggests the range of meaning that decorum can embrace, moving from the grand concept of life in harmony with nature, down to specie quadam liberali - which the Loeb translation renders prissily but accurately as "a certain deportment such as becomes a gentleman." It can be seen as a fundamental principle of moral order, or as a matter of keeping up appearances and observing social conventions.

Though Cicero's attempts at a formal definition of decorum are confused and confusing, he makes its nature much clearer by an analogy with the use of the word in literary criticism. Literary decorum was classically defined by Horace in the Ars poetica (here translated by Ben Jonson):

Or follow fame, thou that dost write, or faine
 Things in themselves agreeing [sibi convenientia]: If againe
 Honour'd Achilles chance by thee be seiz'd,
 Keepe him still active, angry, un-appeas'd,
 Sharpe, and contemning lawes....
 If something strange, that never yet was had
 Unto the Scene thou bringst, and dar'st create
 A meere new person, looke he keepe his state
 Unto the last, as when he first went forth,
 Still to be like himselfe, and hold his worth [sibi constet].⁶⁴

(It is significant that Horace, describing literary decorum, slips into Stoic terminology - convenientia, sibi constare - while Jonson in his translation resorts to the ubiquitous phrase "like himself.") So, Cicero explains, in a play we would be jarred if a good man were to utter wicked sentiments, but if a tyrant such as Atreus utters them, we applaud,

because the lines are in character, "the speache is fitte for the person." Cicero's word is persona, which can mean "mask," "role," or "person." Literary decorum means the maintenance of consistency of character: "then, we saye, the poets keepe that grace, whiche becommeth: when it, that to eche person is fittinge, bothe is doone, and sayde." ⁶⁵ Moral decorum, similarly, means the consistent playing of one's proper role.

In defining our proper role, however, we must distinguish between the two kinds of role which we have been assigned: the general role of a human being, and our individual roles.

We muste understand ... that wee be cladde by nature (as it were) with twoo parsons [personis]: whereof the one is commune, bicause we al be partakers of reason, and the preeminence, whereby wee surmounte beastes, from whiche reason, all honestye, and comelinesse is deryved, and oute of the whiche, the waye of findinge duetie is soughte: the other is that whiche proprelie to echeman is assigned. ⁶⁶

In the first place, simply by virtue of our humanity, we have been assigned "a personage of gret excellence"; we have been given the "partes" (the theatrical metaphor is implicit in Cicero's partes) of constancy, ⁶⁷ temperance, self-control, concern for others. We are required to act in a way consistent with the dignity of human (as opposed to animal) nature: to act rationally, to control our passions and sensual appetites, to follow nature and right reason. ⁶⁸ This is the universal aspect of Stoic homologia, life in harmony with the natural order. The result of such a life is a spiritual state analogous to physical beauty:

For as the beutifulnesse of the bodye wyth proportionable makynge of the limmes moveth a mans eies and delyteth them ever with this, that al the parts with a certain grace agre together: right so this comelinesse that shyneth abroad in our life, winneth their likinge, with whom we live, by an ordre, ⁶⁹ stedfastnesse, and mesurablenesse in all oure wordes, and deedes.

The man who observes decorum has "a daily beauty in his life." It is this kind of beauty which Antony sees in Brutus:

His life was gentle; and the elements
So mix'd in him that Nature might stand up
And say to all the world "This was a man!"

In Antony's view, the elements of Brutus' life are so perfectly in harmony with one another and with Nature that he fulfils with perfect decorum the role of a human being.

Decorum cannot be truly observed, however, without taking into account its second aspect: the nature of the individual. Human character varies as much as physical appearance. Some people are naturally serious, some cheerful; some straightforward, some subtle and devious; some gracious, some harsh in manner. Such differences are perfectly natural and not to be criticised; so long as they are not vicious, they should positively be cultivated.

But every mans owne guiftes, not such as be faultie [vitiosa], but natural [propria], ar earnestly to be maintained, whereeby [sic] the sooner may that comlinessse be kepte, whiche wee do seeke. For in such wise we muste worke, as againste all nature [universam naturam] wee never strive: which thing avoided, let us folow our own proper nature [propriam naturam].⁷¹

So long as it is not in conflict with Nature in the universal sense, with right reason and virtue, you should follow your own individual nature. It is impossible to act successfully against your own nature, however desirable it might seem to be. Even though other courses may appear "graver, and better," you must still follow those that you yourself are fitted for:

For neither is it to anye purpose to fight againste nature nor to ensue [=pursue] any thyng that ye can not atteine. ...[N]othing becommeth, mawger Minerva, as they say, that is, nature withstanding, and resistyng it. In brieefe, if ought bee comely,

of trouth ther is nothing more seemely, than an evennesse [aequabilitas] in all [a] mans lyfe, and everye of hys doinges: which you can not keepe, if you counterfette an others nature, and lette passe your owne.⁷²

The essence of decorum is self-consistency, and it is impossible to be self-consistent when you are playing an artificial and inappropriate role.

This view leads Cicero to a kind of ethical relativism. Right and wrong may be different for different people; to take an extreme example, suicide may be the right action for one man and wrong for another in the same situation. The companions of Cato at Utica were probably right to save their lives by surrender, but

when nature hadde geven Cato an uncredible gravitie, and the same he hadde strengthened wyth a continuall stedfastnesse [constantia]: and alwayes hadde remayned in his intent, and determined purpose, it was meete for him rather to dye, than too looke upon the tyrauntes face.⁷³

It was in keeping with decorum, and therefore right, for Cato to kill himself and die "like Cato, like himself." This is essentially the same as Seneca's Panaetian defence of suicide for the sake of dignitas.⁷⁴

Unlike Seneca, however, Cicero implies that such constantia would not necessarily have been right or decorous for another man. Every man should be "like himself," but that does not necessarily imply the immovable and rocklike selfhood of the Stoic sapiens. The inflexibility of Ajax would not have been appropriate for the slippery and adaptable Ulysses.

Which diversities when wee beholde, it shal be necessary to weye, what eche man hath of his owne and to order those giftes, and not to have a mynde to trye, howe other mens graces woulde become hym. For that becommeth eche man, which is moste of all eche mannes owne [id ... maxime quemque decet, quod est cuiusque maxime suum]. Let every man therfore know his owne disposition [Suum quisque igitur noscat ingenium], and let him make him selfe a sharpe judge both of hys vyces, and of his vertues....⁷⁵

Cicero thus echoes the ancient moral precept Nosce teipsum, "Know thyself." He uses it, however, to re-introduce the analogy of theatrical characters and roles. We ought to know our own characters, "lest players may seeme too have more discretion than wee." Actors choose "not the best enterludes, but the fittest for them selves" - a point Cicero backs up with examples of Roman actors and the parts in which they specialised:

For who upon theyr voices be bolde, they take Epigones, and Medea, who upon gesture, doo take Menalippa and Clytemnestre. Ever more Rutilius, whome I remember, tooke Antiope, not often Esopus toke Ajax. Shall a player then see this in the stage, that a wise man shall not see in his lyfe?

Therefore we ought to strive to play the part in life for which we are best suited. Of course, this is not always possible, and sometimes we have to perform an uncongenial part.

in case necessitie shall drive us sometime, to those thinges, which shall not be for our disposition, all care, studie, and diligence, must bee employed: that, if we do them not comlye, yet wyth as lyttle uncomlynesse as may be....⁷⁶

In practice, in human society, the playing of an appropriate role is complicated by other factors. To the two basic kinds of decorum, appropriate to general human nature and individual character, must be added the further social roles, personae, imposed upon us either by fortune (social class, wealth, family background) or by our own choice. In choosing a career we choose the role we wish to play, and this is the most important and difficult choice of our lives. We make it when we are young and inexperienced; we may choose superficially attractive but inappropriate "role-models," or be unduly influenced by family traditions and expectations, or merely drift into a career on the current of public opinion (multitudinis iudicio feruntur).⁷⁷ Ideally, however, the decision should be made on a basis of true self-knowledge and an accurate judgement

of one's own character and abilities. The influence of external fortune as well as innate nature must be taken into account, but there is no real contest between the two: Nature is "much the surer, and the steeper [firmior ... et constantior]," and should always prevail. If a person finds later in life that he has made a wrong and unwise choice in youth, he is right to change it, but as slowly and cautiously as possible, and with care to demonstrate to the world that the change is for the better.⁷⁸ What is vital is the choice of a way of life which can be followed consistently, so "that in the continuance of our life we may agree with our selves [constare ... nobismet], and never haulte in any dutie." The essence of decorum is constantia (consistency):

Who so then wylly applye all the purpose of hys lyfe, accordinge to the kynde of his nature not corrupted, let him keepe a stedfastnes, for that becommeth moste of all [is constantiam teneat (id enim maxime decet)].....⁷⁹

Cicero's decorum and Seneca's constantia sapientis both arise, ultimately, out of the Stoic principle of homologia. They have in common a desire for evenness, harmony, consistency, both with nature and right reason and within oneself; they both demand that the good man shall be always the same. They develop these basic principles in different directions, however: those which I have defined as constancy (steadfastness) and constancy (consistency).

Seneca stresses heroic steadfastness in extreme situations, the virtue of the sapiens whose invulnerable soul is unmoved and unchanged by any pressure, and aspires to godlike perfection. Cicero (perhaps more in tune with the temper of original Stoic thought) stresses harmonious and consistent life in this world and in human society. He tends, indeed, to regard the ideal of the absolutely self-sufficient sapiens as selfish, anti-social, and potentially dangerous: whether it leads to Herculean

ambition or to contemptus mundi, it does not contribute to the good of society. Cicero's ideal of civic, Roman virtue is directed not towards individual self-perfection but towards the good of the commonwealth. His decorum is a matter of playing, with temperance, reason, and harmonious consistency, one's proper role in the world and in society. The intensely private state of mind which is Senecan constantia is turned into a more external thing, the acting of a social role.

Cicero's decorum, however, is an ambiguous concept, and capable of extremely divergent interpretations. Some scholars stress its externality and its connection with the modern sense of "decorum," proper behaviour, species liberalis; so Herschel Baker suggests that Cicero's legacy to the Renaissance was the identification of virtue with a "rather prissy decorum." Others, however, such as Janet Spens and Hiram Haydn, stress the individualism inherent in Cicero's idea of following one's own nature, and so trace a direct line between De officiis and the Renaissance tradition of "bastard Stoicism" (Haydn) - that is, what I have called "amoral constancy," the principle that truth to oneself overrides all other moral or social considerations.

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This is, in my view, a misreading of Cicero, which ignores his insistence throughout De officiis on the overriding importance of the good of society. Nevertheless, the fact that such a misreading is possible suggests genuine ambiguities and contradictions within Cicero's concept of decorum. It can be interpreted, if one stresses what Cicero says about the importance of self-knowledge and being consistently oneself, in such a way that (to quote Kaufmann's phrase about Seneca) "authenticity of self becomes primary." At the same time, there is clearly a tension between this ideal of self-knowledge and Cicero's metaphor of the persona, of wearing a mask or playing a role. A role is necessarily played mainly for the benefit of others, and concern for decorum in playing the role, for

staying in character, implies attention more to the reactions of one's audience than to absolute truth to oneself. Cicero does not really face these contradictions. His only safeguard against the potentially amoral and anti-social implications of the ideal is his statement that truth to one's own nature must not conflict with universal nature; and in spite of his awareness elsewhere of the dangers of public opinion, he passes lightly over the likelihood of being led by external pressures to play an inauthentic, hypocritical, or inappropriate role.

Ciceronian decorum thus contains the same tension between inwardness and externality as we saw in Senecan constancy, though the balance tips on the opposite side. In Seneca, the claim of a heroic immovability of soul is undercut by the implication that this immovability may be merely assumed; in Cicero, a concept of virtue based upon consistent role-playing is in uneasy tension with an insistence upon truth to oneself.

[7] Shakespeare and Ciceronian decorum

These passages of De officiis are, in my view, of central importance in Shakespeare's Roman plays. Though Cicero's ideas, including that of decorum, have been so influential in western thought that it is hard to prove direct indebtedness, I believe that Shakespeare's use of the image of "Roman actors," and the concept of virtue as consistently playing the part of oneself, are directly derived from De officiis I. Shakespeare uses decorum, however, not (as, for example, T. McAlindon assumes in Shakespeare and Decorum) as an uncritically accepted moral standard, but in order to explore its unresolved problems and contradictions and its complex relationship with Roman Stoic constancy.

In Julius Caesar, Brutus echoes Cicero in urging his fellows to

emulate "our Roman actors" and maintain decorum, "formal constancy," in the consistent playing of their parts. These Romans are indeed preoccupied with consistency, aeguabilitas, "an evennesse in all [a] mans lyfe, and everye of hys doinges." Caesar is adamant that "always I am Caesar"; Brutus, whatever happens to him, "will be found like Brutus." They speak of themselves frequently in the third person, as if of their persona, their role or mask. Decorum must be maintained; the actor must not slip out of character. Yet, when judged by Cicero's precepts, the Romans of Julius Caesar are at fault. They lack self-knowledge, and their roles are not chosen out of a close and realistic judgement of their natural characters. Brutus is led by public opinion and a sense of his family's heroic traditions to "seek within [him]self for that which is not in [him]," and to adopt a role which he thinks noble but for which he is quite unfitted. The wise men of Julius Caesar do, in fact, show less wisdom that the Roman actors on whom they model themselves.

Coriolanus explores more deeply the paradox of decorum embodied in its hero's claim, "I play the man I am." Coriolanus is obsessed with being true to his own nature, maintaining decorum in the playing of the social role for which he is ideally suited. His devotion to it is such that, when he is required to assume another role - "a part which never / I shall discharge to th'life" - he is unable to perform it, as Cicero would advise, "wyth as lyttle uncomlynesse as may be"; the appalling indecorum of his actions is too much for him. In the fanatical consistency of his role-playing, he shows how decorum can become identified with Senecan constancy, and, like it, can become amoral and destructive. Yet, in his final determination to be constant at all costs, Coriolanus runs into the tragic conflict which Cicero has hinted at: in being true to his own nature, propria natura, he is in conflict with universa natura, the "Great nature" which cries out against the unnaturalness of his actions. In such

a conflict, as Cicero said, great nature must prevail.

Antony and Cleopatra explores an alternative view of decorum (perhaps influenced by Montaigne) in which the idea of truth to self is divorced from that of constancy (consistency). Antony and Cleopatra refuse to be tied down to playing a single role consistently; yet they still claim to be observing decorum. To be true to themselves, for such complex personalities in a complex and mutable world, requires not "evenness" but an acceptance and pursuit of "infinite variety." Instead of accepting that "stedfastnes ... becommeth moste of all," they claim that "everything
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becomes" them.

Shakespeare, with a deeper awareness than Cicero of the complexity of human nature and moral choice, saw, I believe, the potentiality for tragic conflict in the contradictions of Ciceronian decorum and between it and Stoic constancy. It is for this reason, rather than any simple acceptance of his doctrines, that Cicero, the sceptical Stoic with his ambivalent attitude to Stoic constancy and his ambiguous ideal of decorum, is a seminal influence on the Roman plays.

CHAPTER FOUR

PLUTARCH'S CONSTANCY TRIPTYCH

[1] Introduction

The source of Shakespeare's three Roman plays is Plutarch's Lives, in the 1579 translation of Sir Thomas North.¹ This does not necessarily mean, however, that Plutarch was the main source of his idea of Rome and Roman virtue. In the words of R. R. Bolgar, the fact that

while Shakespeare's Romans are indeed Roman and carry their Stoicism with an authentic solemnity, his Greeks are scarcely Greek ... seems to suggest that it is not to North alone that we owe the verisimilitude of the Roman plays. ... There must have been some other factor involved.²

One of the most important of these factors, in my view, was the idea of constancy which Shakespeare derived from Cicero, from Seneca (or the Senecan tradition), and from the popular Neostoicism of the 1590s and 1600s. Reading Plutarch in the light of these ideas, Shakespeare (I shall argue) saw "constancy" as a theme linking the "Lives" of Brutus, Antony, and Coriolanus. These three "Lives" can be read as a triptych illustrating an Aristotelian pattern of virtue as a mean between defect and excess: Brutus embodying the virtue of constancy, Antony its defect,³ inconstancy, and Coriolanus its excess, wilful obstinacy.

This pattern is not, of course, deliberately created by Plutarch, though its Aristotelian balance is in keeping with the temper of his

thought, his belief that (in the words of Amyot's preface to the Lives)

it is a vertue of the minde which teacheth a man the meane poynt,
between the two faultie extremities of too much & too litle,
wherein the commendation of all doings consisteth.⁴

A contrast between the moderate virtue of Brutus and the "faultie extremities" of Antony and Coriolanus is implicit in the three "Lives." Plutarch did not, however, design these three "Lives" as a group. Nor did he consciously characterise the three men in terms of Stoic constancy; he was not a Stoic, and has no single Greek equivalent for the words "constant" and "constancy" as they appear in North's translation.⁵ It is North - building on the practice of Amyot, whose French version of the Greek he is directly translating - who makes constancy appear a central concept, by using the words freely (like Lodge in his version of Seneca) to translate a variety of expressions, and introducing them without warrant in the original as a moral gloss on the text. He thus makes it possible for Shakespeare, reading the three "Lives" with his ear already attuned to the word "constancy," to perceive the pattern I have described: Brutus, Antony, and Coriolanus as three ethical types placed in terms of their relationship to the virtue of constancy. I shall argue that Shakespeare did perceive this pattern, and that it was partly his perception of it which led ~~to~~ him to dramatise these three particular "Lives." His awareness of the problematic nature of constancy, however, leads him to see analogies which Plutarch would have disavowed; in particular, to see the principled steadfastness of Brutus and the irrational obstinacy of Coriolanus as parallel manifestations of the Roman pursuit of absolute constancy.

[2] Constant Brutus

"Constancy" and "constant" are keywords in North's translation of "The Life of Marcus Brutus." They appear nine times in the "Life," with subtly shifting connotations which can be seen as summing up the whole range of Brutus' virtues.

Constancy is associated at the start with the rational virtue of Brutus the philosopher.⁶ This is emphasised by a comparison with his ancestor Lucius Junius Brutus, who drove the Tarquins out of Rome.

But that Junius Brutus being of a sower stearne nature, not softned by reason, being like unto sword blades of too hard a temper: was so subject to his choller and malice he bare unto the tyrants, that for their sakes he caused his owne sonnes to be executed. But this Marcus Brutus in contrary maner ... having framed his manners of life by the rules of vertue and study of Philosophy, and having imployed his wit, which was gentle and constant, in attempting of great things: me thinkes he was rightly made and framed unto vertue.⁷

Implicitly, Plutarch rejects any analogy between Lucius Brutus' execution of his sons and Marcus Brutus' murder of his friend (and putative father).⁸ Old Brutus was governed by irrational emotions; young Brutus' character, naturally more gentle, was guided by reason and philosophical principle. "Constant" here translates Amyot's grave and hence Plutarch's embrithe (weighty, serious-minded, Latin gravis): so North equates constancy (consistency) with Roman gravitas. Brutus is stable and self-controlled, not carried away by emotion or caprice, but consistently guided by a rational knowledge of what is right. As Plutarch later describes him,

Brutus ... was a marvellous lowly and gentle person, noble minded, and would never be in any rage, nor caried away with pleasure and covetousnesse, but had ever an upright mind with him, and would never yeeld to any wrong or injustice...⁹

The idea of constancy (embrithes) is developed in Caesar's comment on Brutus and Plutarch's gloss on it:

They say also that Caesar sayd, when he heard Brutus plead: I know not, sayd he, what this young man would, but what he would, he willeth it vehemently. For as Brutus gravitie and constant minde would not graunt all men their requestes that sued unto him, but being moved with reason and discretion, did alwayes encline to that which was good and honest: even so when it was moved to follow any matter, he used a kinde of forcible and vehement perswasion that calmed not, till he had obtained his desire. For by flattering of him, a man could never obtaine any thing at his handes, nor make him to do that which was unjust.¹⁰

"Gravitie and constant minde" is North's expansion of Amyot's gravité (Plutarch's embrithes). Two ideas are implied: Brutus is careful not to be easily swayed by emotion but only by a rational decision about what is just; once resolved, however, he is unshakably determined. The same concept of constancy underlies Cassius' warning to Brutus that Caesar's favours are designed "not to honour his vertue, but to weaken his constant minde, framing it to the bent of his bow."¹¹ It is echoed by North's side-note on a later passage in which Brutus refuses to accept Cassius' plea that absolute standards of honesty are out of place in wartime: "The wonderfull constancy of Brutus, in matters of justice & equity."¹²

Brutus, like Shakespeare's Caesar in the "northern star" speech (though without his hubristic grandeur), will do what he knows to be right, unmoved by any external pressure or persuasion. "Constancy" in these passages stands for an immovable moral rigour.

As Plutarch proceeds to the conspiracy, "constancy" shifts towards the more Senecan sense of steadfastness in the face of adversity; at the same time it takes on overtones of dissimulation. Both Brutus and Portia show "formal constancy," an outward appearance of self-control which disguises their inward perturbation. Brutus in public "did so frame and fashion his countenance and lookes, that no man could discerne he had any thing to

trouble his minde"; yet at home, and in his sleep, he was unable to
 conceal his anxieties and appeared "cleane chaunged."¹³ Portia gives
 herself a voluntary wound to demonstrate that she can "constantlie beare a
 secret mischaunce or grieffe," and proudly declares, "now I have found by
 experience, that no paine nor grieffe whatsoever can overcome me."¹⁴ The
 claim is ironically disproved on the day of the murder, when, "being too
 weake to away with so great and inward grieffe of minde," she becomes
 hysterical "like those that are ... possest with the furie of the
 Bacchantes," and finally faints.¹⁵ Brutus' self-control is more
 successful. Plutarch comments on "the wonderfull assured constancie of
 these conspiratours" - apathes in the Greek - as they maintain the
 appearance of innocence and calm despite a series of near-betrayals.¹⁶
 Brutus remains unmoved even on receiving a false report of Portia's death:
 "it grieved him, as it is to be presupposed: yet he left not off the care
 of his country and common wealth."¹⁷ This passage probably suggested
 Shakespeare's portrayal of the way Brutus receives the news of Portia's
 real death.¹⁸

Steadfastness and dissimulation are again linked in the account of
 Portia's constancy as she faces parting with Brutus. She "did what she
 could to dissemble the grieffe and sorrow she felt" and "alwaies shewed a
 constant and patient minde," but finally broke down while looking at a
 painting of the parting of Hector and Andromache.¹⁹ Brutus praises her
 because, although "the weake constitution of her bodie" does not allow her
 to fight, "for courage and constant mind, she shewed her selfe as stout in
 the defence of her country, as any of us."²⁰ This contrast between bodily
 weakness and the moral strength of "untir'd spirits" is a recurring motif
 in Julius Caesar.

The last explicit reference to constancy in the "Life," and perhaps
 the most interesting and complex, is Brutus' reply to Cassius' question

whether he will kill himself if defeated.

Brutus a[n]swered him, being yet but a young man, and not over greatly experienced in the world: I trust, (I know not how) a certaine rule of Philosophy, by the which I did greatly blame and reprove Cato for killing of himselfe, as being no lawfull nor godly acte, touching the gods, nor concerning men, valiant, not to give place and yeeld to divine providence, and not constantly & patiently to take whatsoever it pleaseth him to send us, but to draw back and flie: but being now in the middest of the danger, I am of a contrary mind. For if it be not the will of God, that this battell fall out fortunate for us: I will looke no more for hope ... but wil rid me of this miserable world, and content me with my fortune. For, I gave up my life for my countrey in the Ides of March, for the which I shall live in an other more glorious world.²¹

As many commentators have noted, North's mistranslation here obscures the sense.²² In the Greek Brutus clearly says that when he was young and inexperienced he used to disapprove of suicide, but now he has changed his mind. North, by changing a past to a present tense and punctuating "being yet a young man..." as an authorial comment, makes it seem that Brutus (like Hector in Troilus and Cressida) performs a moral volte-face in the middle of the speech. Shakespeare's version sharpens the contrast: Brutus firmly declares his disapproval of suicide, then, when Cassius asks if this really means that he is willing to be led in triumph, recoils and declares that he would rather die - without apparently recognising that he contradicts himself.²³ The contradiction is important, for it implies the question which was classically posed by Hamlet:

Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,
And by opposing end them?²⁴

Which is the more truly "constant" act: to stand fast and endure suffering, or to put an end to it by suicide? Is suicide a supremely heroic act or a cowardly evasion? Shakespeare, building on North's

mistranslation of Plutarch, suggests a fundamental paradox in the idea of Stoic constancy.

In the final sections of the "Life," though "constancy" is not explicitly mentioned, a related idea emerges: that of being "like oneself." Plutarch suggests that Brutus is bound by the opinion others have of him: "they had so great an opinion of Brutus vertue, that the common voice & opinion of the world would not suffer him, neither to overcome, nor to save himself, otherwise then justly and honestly...." ²⁵ When Lucilius is captured impersonating Brutus, some of the onlookers criticise Brutus, "saying it was not done like himselfe so cowardly to be taken alive ... for feare of death"; but Lucilius declares that Brutus will never be taken alive, "For wheresoever he be found, alive or dead: he will be found like himselfe." ²⁶ Shakespeare, of course, takes over this latter passage; he relates it to the Renaissance use of "like oneself" as a formula for constancy, and draws out, and makes central to the play, the implications of role-playing and of living up to the opinions of oneself held by others.

"Constancy" in the "Life of Marcus Brutus" has a range of meanings: moral integrity, resolution in pursuing a chosen course, rationality and freedom from passion, endurance of suffering, concealment of feelings, willingness to die (or to live). Plutarch and North clearly make it possible for Shakespeare to see this virtue as the keynote of Brutus' character. At the same time, he develops the idea in the light of Cicero and Seneca. The motif of acting is not nearly so explicit in the "Life" as in the play; nor is the idea of conformity to public opinion and the moral problems it creates; nor is the idea of striving to be "Roman." It is Shakespeare too who extends the virtue of constancy to Caesar, and gives him a Senecan boast on the subject for which there is no basis either in this "Life" or in that of Caesar.

Plutarch treats Brutus throughout the "Life" with great respect, as something of a moral ideal.²⁷ In "The Comparison of Dion with Brutus" (in which he compares Brutus with the Greek philosopher-patriot who deposed Dionysius, tyrant of Syracuse) his attitude becomes more ambivalent, not so say confused. At first he suggests that Dion was the more admirable of the two, because he had been intolerably wronged by Dionysius, whereas Brutus "imbrued his hands" in the blood of the friend who had saved his life and raised him to high office.²⁸ On the other hand, Brutus can be seen as the better man because he killed his friend and benefactor for no personal grudge but "onely referring his friendship and enmitie, unto the consideration of justice and equitie."²⁹ Plutarch's attempt at a summing-up ends in self-contradiction. As J. L. Simmons argues, the "paradoxes and moral ambiguities" in this "Comparison" are central to Julius Caesar.³⁰ To be so rational, so unmoved by personal emotion, as to kill one's friend in order to be constant to one's principles - is this the height of virtue, or of inhumanity? Shakespeare, like Plutarch and North, presents Brutus as the embodiment of the Roman and Stoic virtue of constancy; his implied criticism is of the ideal itself, and what it can do to a man who attempts to pursue it absolutely.

[3] Inconstant Antony

The idea of constancy is far less prominent in the "Life of Marcus Antonius" than in that of Brutus. Nevertheless, the two "Lives," read in conjunction (as Shakespeare must have read them in preparing for Julius Caesar), may be seen as inverted mirror images. Plutarch's Antonius is a kind of antitype of his Brutus: governed by emotions rather than reason, unscrupulous, intemperate in his love of pleasure, vacillating, impatient,

capricious, repeatedly flying from one extreme to another - in every way lacking the constancy which is Brutus' leading quality. He is capable of great virtues - courage, magnanimity, generosity - but never of anything stable or consistent, or of carrying out any purpose with resolution. His unstable opportunism is seen in his actions after the murder of Caesar: at first he flees in panic, then cautiously emerges to make his peace with the murderers, then changes as he scents the wind changing: "But now, the opinion he conceived of him selfe after he had a little felt the good will of the people towards him ... did easily make him alter his first minde."³¹ Lacking constant resolution and a firm moral direction of his own, he is easily carried away by the influence and opinion of others, as he is, literally, at Actium:

There Antonius shewed plainly that he had not onely lost the courage and hart of an Emperour, but also of a valiant man: (proving that true which an old man spake in myrth, that the soule of a lover lived in another body, and not in his owne) he was so caried away with the vaine love of this woman, as if he had bene glued unto her, & that she could not have removed without moving of him also.³²

Plutarch characterises him as a man dominated by emotion and sensuality:

"And in the end, the horse of the minde as Plato termeth it, that is so hard of raine (I meane the unreyned lust of concupiscence) did put out of Antonius head, all honest and commendable thoughtes...."³³

The only explicit reference to constancy in the "Life" is surprisingly positive. It comes in a passage which Shakespeare closely followed, the account of Antonius' retreat from Modena, during which he suffered terribly from famine.

Howbeit he was of such a strong nature, that by patience he would overcome any adversitie, and the heavier fortune lay upon him, the more constant shewed he himselfe. Every man that feeleth want or adversity, knoweth by vertue and discretion what he should doe: but when in deede they are overlayed with extremity, and be sore oppressed, few have the hearts to follow that which they praise

and commend, and much lesse to avoide that they reprove and mislike. But rather to the contrary, they yeeld to their accustomed easie life: and through faint heart, & lacke of corage, doe chaunge their first mind and purpose. And therefore it was a wonderfull example to the souldiers, to see Antonius that was brought up in all finenesse and superfluity, so easily to drinke puddle water, and to eate wild frutes and rootes: and moreover it is reported, that even as they passed the Alps, they did eate the barks of trees, and such beasts, as never man tasted of their flesh before.³⁴

"Constant" (North's interpolation) suggests both sheer endurance, and the moral quality of sticking to a purpose despite pressure to "chaunge [one's] first minde and purpose."³⁵ Antonius is capable of this kind of constancy in extreme adversity. His lack of it at other times, especially in the face of sensual temptations and flattery, may be seen as the key to his tragedy.

The theme of constancy and inconstancy is thus implicit in the "Life of Marcus Antonius." There is, however, little sense in Plutarch of the continual play in Antony and Cleopatra with ideas of mutability and stability, constancy and variety; nor is there much in Plutarch's account of the lovers' suicides to suggest the trappings of Stoic heroism with which Shakespeare surrounds their deaths. Shakespeare is here imposing his own preoccupation with Stoic constancy upon Plutarch's story. He also suggests what is hardly suggested in Plutarch, that there is a kind of moral principle involved in Antony's faults. The same reinterpretation is involved in his treatment of Plutarch's Coriolanus.

[4] Obstinate Coriolanus

In "The Life of Caius Martius Coriolanus," constancy once again becomes a keyword. Plutarch, however, treats Coriolanus not as a constant man but as one who has the vice of irrational and wilful obstinacy. It is

Shakespeare, I believe, who sees a fundamental similarity between what Plutarch regards as Brutus' virtue and Coriolanus' vice.

Plutarch's opening description of Martius (as he consistently calls him) suggests the contradictions in his attitude to the character.

This man also is a good prooffe to confirme some mens opinions. That a rare and excellent witte untaught, doth bring forth many good and evill thinges together, like a fat soile bringeth forth herbes & weedes that lieth unmanured. For this Martius naturall wit and great hart did marvellously sturre up his courage to doe and attempt notable actes. But on the other side for lacke of education, he was so cholericke and impacient, that he would yeeld to no living creature: which made him churlish, uncivil, and altogether unfit for any man's conversation. Yet men marvelling much at his constancie, that he was never overcome with pleasure, nor money, and how he would endure easilie all manner of paines and travailes: thereupon they well liked and commended his stownes and temperancie. But for all that, they could not be acquainted with him, as one citizen useth to be with another in the cittie. His behaviour was so unpleasant to them by reason of a certaine insolent and sterne manner he had, which because it was too lordly, was disliked. And to say truly, the greatest benefite that learning bringeth men unto, is this: that it teacheth men that be rude and rough by nature, by compasse and rule of reason, to be civill and curteous, & to like better the meane state, then the higher....³⁶

In Plutarch's Greek this passage is an orderly series of balanced antitheses; North's version, proceeding by a series of zigzags ("But on the other side Yet But for all that"), creates an effect of moral confusion. Martius is commended for his "constancie" (the word is Amyot's, translating Plutarch's apatheian) that "was never overcome" by physical hardship or by the temptations of money or pleasure; at the same time he is condemned for being "so cholericke and impacient, that he would yeeld to no living creature." Shakespeare may well have been struck by the similarities in idea and wording to the account of Brutus, who was "never ... carried away with pleasure and covetousness," and "would never yield to any wrong or injustice," but pursued what he believed was right with immovable determination - "what he would, he willeth it vehemently."

Brutus' apatheia to passion, pleasure, and adversity, and his immovable resolution, are all a part of his characteristic virtue of constancy. In Martius, on the other hand, Plutarch draws a distinction: his apatheia is a virtue, but his obstinacy is a flaw which vitiates it.

Plutarch would no doubt object that the inconsistency was only apparent, and the likeness between the two men superficial. Brutus practiced the best kind of rational and philosophical virtue; Martius by comparison is a barbarian, whose stubbornness proceeds not from rational principle but from pride, anger and self-will. He resembles not so much Marcus Brutus as his ancestor Lucius (a near-contemporary of Martius), whose "sower stearne nature, not softned by reason" was governed by "choller and malice." Martius and Lucius Brutus are products of a primitive society which values courage above all else: "Now in those days, valiantnes was honoured in ROME above all other vertues: which they call virtus, by the name of vertue it selfe, as including in that generall name, all other speciall vertues besides." ³⁷ Such a society can inculcate the virtus of brute courage and endurance, but not the Aristotelian balance and moderation - "to like better the meane state, than the higher" (or, more accurately, "than excess") - which for Plutarch is the essence of virtue. Lacking this virtue, Martius carries his form of constancy to excess, and practices it in situations where it is inappropriate, in the ³⁸ forum as well as on the battlefield.

Shakespeare, on the other hand, seems to have seen a genuine likeness between the constancy of Brutus and of Coriolanus. Though their characters are vastly different, they share an ideal of being always the same, immovable by external circumstances and personal emotions, always "like themselves." And, though there is an equally great difference between the Rome of Brutus and Coriolanus, there is sufficient similarity between their ideals to suggest that this is a peculiarly Roman concept of

virtue. No doubt, Coriolanus is extreme; yet Plutarch himself praises him, just before the passage quoted, for showing that even with faulty education a man may be able to "excell in vertue above the common sorte" - a phrase Shakespeare's hero echoes in his double-edged promise to "exceed
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 the common." Is there not something in Roman morality, even that of Brutus, which tends towards extreme aspirations?

The nature of Martius' obstinacy is more clearly defined when he comes into conflict with the people. Plutarch reiterates his criticism of him as "a man too full of passion and choller, and too much given to over selfe will and opinion," and draws a moral from Plato:

wilfulnesse is the thing of the world, which a governour of a commonwealth for pleasing should shun, being that which Plato called solitarinesse. As in the end, all men that are wilfully given to a selfe opinion and obstinate minde, and who will never yeeld to others reason, but to their owne: remaine without companie, and forsaken of all men.

He does at this point acknowledge that Martius' wilfulness is not merely an involuntary fault, but is rooted in misguided moral principle: Martius is "a stoute man of nature, that never yeelded in any respect, as one thinking that to overcome alwaies, and to have the upper hand in all matters, was a token of magnanimitie..." In fact, however (Plutarch insists), it is a token of "base and faint courage, which spitteth out anger from the most weake and passioned part of the heart, much like the matter of an imposthume." Governed by his turbulent passions, Martius lacks "the gravitie [embrithes], and affabilitie [praion] that is gotten with judgement of learning and reason, which onely is to be looked for in
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 a governour of state." Though North obscures the echo, these are precisely the words used in "Brutus" to describe Brutus' "gentle and constant" mind. Martius, like Antonius, is for Plutarch an anti-Brutus.

Martius' stubborn pride is as irrational and extreme as the fickle turbulence of the plebeians - a judgement emphasised by two juxtaposed

side-notes in North: "See the fickle mindes of common people," and "The fruites of selfe will and obstinacie."⁴¹ Both extremes, fickleness and obstinacy, are condemned; Plutarch's sympathy is with the moderate patricians who attempt "like wise men ... to consider temperately of things."⁴²

When Martius is banished, North's side-note draws attention to "Coriolanus constant mind in adversitie." The text, however, makes it clear that this "constancy" is of a peculiar and perverse kind.

Martius alone ... neither in his countenance nor in his gate, did ever shew himselfe abashed, or once let fall his great courage: but ... did outwardly shew no manner of passion, nor care at all of himselfe. Not that he did patiently beare and temper his good [sic] hap, in respect of any reason he had, or by his quiet condition: but because he was so carried away with the vehemencie of anger, and desire of revenge, that he had no sense nor feeling of the hard state he was in, which the common people judge not to be sorow, although in deede it be the very same. For when sorow (as you would say) is set a fire, then it is converted into spite and malice, and driyeth away for that time all faintnesse of heart and naturall feare.⁴³

Though Martius' apparent patience and self-control in adversity resembles that of Brutus or Portia, Plutarch insists that this is not true constancy; it arises not from reason but from an excess of suppressed emotion. It is this strained and unnatural emotional state, a parody of true Stoic constancy, which drives Martius in his determination to be revenged upon Rome. His "obstinate and inflexible rancker" persists until he is confronted with his family; then "nature so wrought with him" that he "yeelded to the affection of his bloud, as if he had been violently caried with the furie of a most swift running streame."⁴⁴

Throughout, Plutarch emphasises the irrational and emotional forces which drive Martius. His inflexible stubbornness is derived from pride, irascibility, and self-will, qualities which vitiate his genuine virtues of courage and endurance. In "The Comparison of Alcibiades with Martius

Coriolanus," Plutarch sums up his tragedy with brutal simplicity:

And of all his misfortune and ill hap, the austeritie of his nature, and his haughtie obstinate minde, was the only cause: the which of it selfe being hateful to the world, when it is joyned with ambition, it groweth then much more churlish, fierce, and intollerable.⁴⁵

Shakespeare's Aufidius echoes this passage when he suggests that the cause of Coriolanus' tragedy was his inflexibility:

Not to be other than one thing, not moving
From th' casque to th' cushion, but commanding peace
Even with the same austerity and garb⁴⁶
As he controll'd the war....

In the phrase "Not to be other than one thing," however, Shakespeare deliberately links Coriolanus' stubbornness with the Stoic virtue of constancy, of being unus idemque inter diversa. He thus suggests an analogy which Plutarch would not have accepted. Coriolanus' stubbornness is not merely a fault in a bull-like character untempered by moral training; it is a moral ideal consciously followed in the belief that to be immovable and unyielding is "a token of magnanimitie" - a belief in which he is supported, up to a point, by his society. If we see in him an absurd and self-destructive rigidity and pride, then that judgement (Shakespeare implies) reflects upon the noble Brutus and upon Roman virtue in general.

The Aristotelian triptych which I have described was not consciously planned by Plutarch, but it is in keeping with his moral attitudes. Brutus is close to Plutarch's ideal of perfectly tempered, consistent, rational virtue. Antonius and Martius, by contrast, are equally flawed by the dominance of their irrational emotions: Antonius' love of pleasure makes him weak and fickle, a puppet in the hands of others; Martius' pride

and anger make him rigid and obstinate, dangerously anti-social in his drive to dominate others.

It may have been his sense of this pattern that drew Shakespeare on from Julius Caesar to choose Antony and Coriolanus as heroes. He reads the "Lives" (if my reconstruction of his thought is accurate) in the light of the Renaissance idea of constancy, and with an awareness of the problems and paradoxes of the ideal which is foreign to Plutarch's comparatively simple moral judgements. Whereas Plutarch simply admires Brutus and condemns Coriolanus, Shakespeare sees a likeness between them; Coriolanus, in carrying the ideal of constancy to a self-destructive extreme, tests it and exposes its inherent flaws. Antony, similarly, is not just a moral weakling, but a man who deliberately seeks "infinite variety" of experience instead of the narrowness of Roman constancy. Whereas Plutarch values the mean, Shakespeare is interested in what happens "when extremities speak," and in exploring these extremes he explores an extremism which is inherent in the ideal of constancy.

PART TWO

THE RENAISSANCE DEBATE

CHAPTER FIVE

THE AMBIVALENT TRADITION: STOICISM IN THE RENAISSANCE

Towards the end of the sixteenth century, Stoic constancy once again became a subject of debate. For a complex combination of reasons, both intellectual and socio-political, Stoicism - long an underground influence in Christian thought - was now revived by the "Neostoic" or "Christian Stoic" movement, and this in turn provoked an anti-Stoic reaction. Both sides of the debate are drawing upon the ambivalent attitude in Christian tradition. Shakespeare, in making constancy the central virtue of his Romans, must have been aware of this controversy, and it is not surprising that his own treatment of constancy shows the same ambivalence. It is necessary, therefore, to sketch in at least briefly the background to the Renaissance debate.¹

[1] Stoicism, Christianity, and Augustine

The Renaissance inherited two conflicting attitudes to Stoicism: on the one hand, admiration for Stoic ethics as essentially in harmony with Christianity; on the other, condemnation of Stoic pride and inhumanity. This contradiction is inherent in Christian tradition, and springs from the coexistence, from the early centuries of Christianity, of two

conflicting attitudes towards pagan thought, which may be labelled "Alexandrian" and "Augustinian."²

The "Alexandrian" attitude was dominant in the early years of Christianity. The theologians of the Alexandrian school (Clement, Gregory Nazanien, Ambrose, and others) regarded pagan thought as a divinely ordained preparation for Christianity, and so desired to take over whatever was good in it. In order to fight the pagans on their own ground, they turned to pagan philosophy, and in particular to Stoicism. Its high moral ideals seemed in harmony with Christianity, and some of its teachings - on natural law, providence, conscience, the unity of mankind - seemed to anticipate Christian doctrine. Thus Stoic ideas were assimilated into Christianity, and "even contributed in shaping [its] moral ideals";³ they became an integral part of Christian teaching. With time, perhaps as millenarian expectations waned and a need was felt for a system of practical, worldly morality, the Church drew increasingly on Stoic ethics; Clement's Instructor and Ambrose's De officiis were moral guidebooks firmly based on Stoic teaching.⁴ Classical Stoics, Cicero and Seneca in particular, were drafted into the fold as honorary Christians, and the legend grew up of Seneca's conversion by St Paul. Tertullian, in a pregnant phrase, called Seneca "saepe noster,"⁵ often one of us.

The phrase, however, implies qualifications: Seneca is often, but not always, in harmony with Christianity. Tertullian, though attracted to Stoicism, was one of the leading figures in a reaction against the adulteration of Christianity. This school of thought, which stressed the unbridgeable gap between Christian and pagan thought, is known as "Augustinian" after its classic statement in Augustine's City of God.⁶

Augustine's wide-ranging attack on pagan society, religion, and philosophy focuses at several points on Stoicism and the ideal of the Stoic hero.

Augustine acknowledges that the Stoics appear admirable, almost like

members of the city of God, in their stress on the virtues of the mind and spirit. Yet they are in fact - like all pagans - citizens of the earthly city, and essentially carnal and worldly, because they place man's happiness in himself and in this life, rather than in God and in eternal life.⁷ Like other pagan philosophers who believe "that the Ultimate Good and the Ultimate Evil are to be found in this life, placing the Supreme Good in the body, or in the soul, or in both," they desire, "with amazing folly, to be happy here on earth and to achieve bliss by their own efforts."⁸

It is perhaps because the moral ideals of the Stoics seem superficially Christian that Augustine is so violent against their "effrontery," "stupefying arrogance," "stiff-necked pride." This pride leads them to suppose that they have attained a moral perfection which is really unattainable for human beings in this life. It is the nature of man to suffer a perpetual conflict between the desires of the spirit and of the flesh; he can only be "made perfect" if this conflict is ended, and

we cannot attain this in our present life, for all our wishing ... God forbid, then, that, so long as we are engaged in this internal strife, we should believe ourselves to have already attained that happiness, the end we desire to reach by our victory. And who has reached such a height of wisdom as to have no struggle to maintain against his lusts?⁹

The Stoic idea of human perfectibility, as a pagan counterpart of the Pelagian heresy which Augustine fought, is a dangerous temptation for Christians.

Augustine concentrates his attack especially on Stoic constantia. The Stoic idea that the wise man can be invulnerable to external evils, because he knows that they are not really evil, is for Augustine arrogant self-deception, based on a denial of the real evils inherent in our fallen world. He mocks the notions that the wise man can be happy while racked by sickness and pain, and that the mind is invulnerable even when attacked

by madness. The Stoics themselves, he alleges, admit the falsity of such claims by their glorification of suicide: "I am astounded at the effrontery of the Stoics in their contention that these ills are not ills at all, when they admit that if they should be so great that a wise man cannot or ought not to endure them, he is forced to put himself to death...." He takes the Stoic arch-hero Cato as a test case to expose these inconsistencies.

Was it by patient endurance that Cato took his own life? Was it not rather through a lack of it? For he would not have so acted had he not been unable to endure Caesar's victory. What happened, then, to his fortitude? Why, it yielded; it succumbed. It was so thoroughly defeated that it abandoned this "happy life"; it deserted and fled. Or was it a happy life no longer? If so, it was a wretched life. Then how can it be that those circumstances were not evil, if they made life a misery from which a man should escape?

By their pretence that real evils are trivial, the Stoics devalue the real moral effort required to live in this world; by their pretence that we can attain happiness in this world they blind themselves to the true happiness of heaven. "[T]hese philosophers refuse to believe in this blessedness because they do not see it; and so they attempt to fabricate for themselves an utterly delusive happiness by means of a virtue whose falsity is in proportion to its arrogance."¹⁰

Sinful pride is also at the root of the Stoic ideal of apatheia, lack of passion. Depending on how it is defined, this ideal is either admirable but unattainable, or else undesirable. "[I]f we are to understand it as meaning a life without the emotions which occur in defiance of reason and which disturb the thoughts, it is clearly a good and desirable state; but it does not belong to this present life"; such a state of moral perfection is only attainable in the next world. On the other hand, "if apatheia is the name of the state in which the mind cannot be touched by any emotion whatsoever, who would not judge this

insensitivity to be the worst of all moral defects?"¹¹ For Christians, emotions are not good or evil in themselves, but must be judged by the quality of the will engaged in them and the object to which they are directed.¹² Christians "feel fear and desire, pain and gladness in conformity with the holy Scriptures and sound doctrine; and because their love is right, all these feelings are right in them." To reject emotions such as love and pity, simply because they are emotions, is unnatural and inhuman.¹³ In fact, the arrogance of the Stoics in rejecting passion is as sinful as passion itself.

[T]hey are so arrogant and pretentious in their irreligion that the swelling of their pride increases in exact proportion as their feeling of pain decreases. Some of those people may display an empty complacency, the more monstrous for being so rare, which makes them so charmed with this achievement in themselves that they are not stirred or excited by any emotions at all, not swayed or influenced by any feelings. If so, they rather lose every shred of humanity than achieve a true tranquillity. For hardness does not necessarily imply rectitude, and insensibility is not a guarantee of health.¹⁴

Augustine's judgement on the Stoics is of a piece with his attitude to the pagan Roman ethic of which they represented the loftiest form. In Book V, he characterises the Romans as dominated by desire for earthly glory: "It was this greed for praise, this passion for glory, that gave rise to those marvellous achievements, which were, no doubt, praiseworthy and glorious in men's estimation."¹⁵ Such an ethic based on worldly opinion is, of course, inferior to one based on a true understanding of virtue as the fulfillment of God's will. Nevertheless, Christians must acknowledge the virtues of courage, justice, temperance and self-denial which the Romans practised in pursuit of this false ideal, and be inspired to emulate them: "If we do not display, in the service of the most glorious City of God, the qualities of which the Romans, after their fashion, gave us something of a model, in their pursuit of the glory of

their earthly city, then we ought to feel the prick of shame." This is essentially Augustine's judgement on the Stoics. They are hopelessly bound to the values of the earthly city, and their ethics are flawed by an desire for worldly glory which leads them into false pride; nevertheless, Christians should acknowledge and emulate their high principles. Indeed, Augustine's very concern to demonstrate the unchristian flaws in their morality suggests how close they are to Christianity.

Augustine's critique of Stoicism was enormously influential, and nearly all later Christian anti-Stoics repeat his charges: the inhumanity and impossibility of the ideal of the sapiens; the evil of denying the passions, and especially pity; the hubristic arrogance of denying heaven and seeking to achieve perfection on earth; the folly and cowardice of Stoic suicide. Nevertheless, the ambivalence visible even in Augustine's markedly hostile critique is also a part of the tradition. Very few later critics are willing to condemn Stoicism entirely.

[2] The humanists and eclectic Stoicism

In a sense, the Renaissance did not have to rediscover Stoicism. The Stoic elements which had been assimilated into Christianity survived through the Middle Ages; Cicero and Seneca continued to be read and valued as moral authorities.¹⁷ The rise of Renaissance humanism, however, brought a far more intense and systematic interest in Greek and Roman thought, and the classical Stoic writers absorbed part of this interest. The works of Cicero and Seneca were newly edited and translated, and lost authors such as Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius were rediscovered.¹⁸

The primary concern of the humanists was with morality, and they turned to classical philosophy for practical and secular moral teachings

instead of the theoretical hair-splitting of the scholastics. This revival of pagan ethics was intended not as a challenge to Christianity but, in the Alexandrian tradition, as complementary to it. It produced, in Kristeller's words, "a body of moral thought that is never opposed to religious doctrine - often explicitly harmonized with it - existing side by side with religious doctrine and claiming for its domain wider and wider areas of human experience." Stoic writers were prominent in this revival of classical ethics, but it was only in a very general sense a revival of Stoicism. The humanists were interested in what Haydn calls "eclectic Stoicism": a mixture of Stoic, Platonic, Aristotelian, and (of course) Christian ideas. Their concern was not to draw academic distinctions between philosophical schools, but to "extract ... a kind of common wisdom that could be learned, imitated, and utilized."

The eclectic Stoicism of the humanists was Ciceronian rather than Senecan; De officiis was its most important single source. The humanists admired Cicero's "tolerant and `reconciling' philosophical position," his moderate and public-spirited brand of Stoic morality (easily harmonised with Christianity), and his aim of teaching how to act both morally and successfully in public life. They were less attracted to the harsher Senecan brand of Stoicism, with its stress on suffering, constancy, death and suicide, and the superhuman virtue of the sapiens.

This Renaissance Ciceronian morality is well illustrated by the English humanist Sir Thomas Elyot (?1490-1546). The Booke Named The Governour (1531), a guide to the moral "offices" of a member of the English ruling class, is moderate, public-spirited, and positive in tone, offering advice by which "governors" can exercise authority successfully while preserving moral integrity and (equally important) being seen to do so: "they shall than seme to all men worthye to be in authoritie, honour, and noblesse, and all that is under their gouvernaunce shall prospere and

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 come to perfection." Elyot does indeed devote a chapter to the virtue of "constance or stabilitie," but only as one virtue among many; we have no sense that constant endurance of suffering is the real test of

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 virtue. Elyot's later dialogue Of the Knowledge which Maketh a Wise Man (1533) is much more Stoic in tone. Here Plato, having narrowly escaped death for criticising the tyrant Dionysius, maintains that he has not really failed, since he maintained his integrity and constancy:

sens by any thyng that hath happened I never fell from that place in the lyne of order/ wherin god had set me, but my mynde was ever in one state and condicion/ & there as it was at my coming into Sicile/ there it hath hither to ever continued, mayst thou reasonably say, that I was ever lost/ in so moche as I was never transformed or out of that astate, where in a wise man ought alway to be?²⁶

The change in tone probably reflects Elyot's own changing political fortunes; but it is perhaps not wholly fanciful to see, in his movement from an optimistic Ciceronian ethic towards a more Senecan Stoic outlook, a foreshadowing of the movement of sixteenth-century thought in general.

Senecan Stoicism was not, of course, entirely neglected by the humanists. Seneca was one of the most popular classical writers and moralists in the Renaissance. Nevertheless, the traditional Christian ambivalence towards his more extreme brand of Stoicism continued to be felt, and Augustine's objections continued to be raised.

We see this ambivalence in the arch-humanist Erasmus. Without being a Stoic in any dogmatic sense, Erasmus is clearly a part of the eclectic Stoic tradition. In the Enchiridion (1504), for instance, he makes use of Stoic ideas such as the maxim "know thyself" and the theory of indifferent things; he urges his readers to study pagan authors as "a good preparation for the Christian life," and calls the Stoics "the staunchest defenders of virtue"; yet he also insists, in the same breath, that the pagan philosophers cannot bring the peace of mind which they claim to seek.²⁷

There is a similar ambivalence in Erasmus's attitude to Seneca, which changes over time. In an essay of 1515 he expresses strong enthusiasm for Seneca as a moral teacher, though with mild criticisms of his style and his arrogant tone. In the introduction to his 1529 edition of Seneca, however, he is much more critical. Demolishing the old myth that Seneca was a secret Christian, he adds, "I think it is in the reader's interest to read Seneca's works as those of a man ignorant of our religion. For if you read him as a pagan, he wrote Christianly; if as a Christian, he wrote paganly." He attacks the arrogant self-sufficiency of the Stoics, in Augustinian tones: Seneca claims that the wise man can achieve his own happiness, but "our faith tells us ... that man has nothing good in himself."²⁸

Earlier, in the Praise of Folly (1509), Erasmus had launched a classic attack - albeit through the somewhat unreliable mouth of Folly - on the Stoics and the ideal of constantia sapientis. When Seneca "seclude[s] all affections from a wyseman, as so many diseases of the mynde,"

he leaveth man, no man, but rather a newfounde god without bodily sence, such as never was, nor never shall be. Yea, to speake plainlier, he dooeth naught els than fourme a stone image of a man, without fealyng, or any maner inclinacion pertainyng to a man in deede. Let the **Stoikes** therefore (if they list) take theyr wyseman to them selves, and make much on hym alone, or (if they thynke good) go and dwell with hym in **Platos citee**, or in the lande of **Fairie**, or **Utopia**. For whiche of you would not lothe, and blisse you from the company of suche maner a man, as were mortified, and benumbed in all those sensis and understandynges, that naturally other men are ledde by? that had no affections reignyng in him? nor woulde no more bee sterred with love, or compassion, than if he were a flint stone? ... [W]ho woulde not sooner preferre any one chosen evin amonges the thickest of the people? who beyng a foole, could aptly either governe, or obey fooles, please the myndes of suche as be lyke unto hym, whiche is the moste parte, be treatable to his wyfe, gladly seen of his friendes, mearie in companie, and lastly woulde thinke nothyng unbecomyng him, that other men use commenly to dooe. But I wene, ye be werie now of this theyr wyseman, as I, for my partt, was a good whyle agoe.²⁹

This passage has been described as "very Augustinian (except for its lively humour), and very human withal"; but the Augustinianism and the humanity do not sit quite easily together. ³⁰ The ridicule of Stoic apatheia, and the portrayal of the sapiens as an impossible monster, half god, half stone statue, are comic translations of Augustine's serious points. Augustine might have hesitated, however, to endorse Erasmus/Folly's preference for human imperfection and folly over the Stoics' inhuman virtue and wisdom - an attitude which seems to look forward to Montaigne rather than back to Augustine. Although Erasmus' mercurial use of irony obviously makes it risky to identify Folly's opinions with his own, the comic energy of the attack suggests that it has at least his partial sympathy.

Erasmus's divided attitude is echoed, on the Protestant side, by Calvin, who in his youth published a commentary on Seneca's De clementia (1532). The very act of writing such a work implies interest and sympathy, yet Calvin in his introduction (as his editor points out) notably avoids passing judgement on Seneca's moral doctrines. In the commentary he criticises Seneca's approval of the desire for glory, rejects his condemnation of pity ("he who feels no pity cannot be a good man - whatever these idle sages discuss in their shady nooks"), and implies disapproval of the Stoic ideal of apatheia, though he pointedly refrains from comment. ³¹ In later works he is more explicit. In the Institutio Christiana (1559) he declares that "patiently to bear the cross is not to be utterly stupefied and to be deprived of all feeling of pain," like the foolish Stoic concept of the sapiens, "one who, having cast off all human qualities, was affected equally by adversity and prosperity ... nay, who like a stone was not affected at all." He goes on:

Now, among the Christians there are also new Stoics, who count it depraved not only to groan and weep but also to be sad and care ridden. ... Yet we have nothing to do with this iron philosophy

which our Lord and Master has condemned not only by his word but also by his example.

. . . .

I decided to say this in order to recall godly minds from despair, lest, because they cannot cast off the natural feeling of sorrow, they forthwith renounce the pursuit of patience. This must necessarily happen to those who make patience into insensibility, and a valiant and constant man into a stock.³²

These criticisms are striking, since similarities have often been noted between the moral doctrines of Stoicism and Calvinism, and the criticisms most often aimed at both are of harshness and lack of pity.

The Augustinian tradition of hostility to Stoicism, and Augustine's specific objections to the inhumanity of Stoic constancy and apatheia, are thus active and indeed commonplace among the Renaissance humanists. We note the key image, present in both Erasmus and Calvin, of the Stoic sapiens as a stone or "stock," an image used by Seneca but taking on, in its use by hostile writers, associations of inhumanity or subhumanity. It finds its way into English in the form of the hackneyed pun Shakespeare uses in The Taming of the Shrew: "Let's be no Stoics nor no stocks, I pray."³³

On the whole, though, there is little urgency in these attacks. Moral distaste and Christian orthodoxy make writers like Erasmus and Calvin dissociate themselves from the more extreme Senecan kind of Stoicism; but only in the Institutio do we have any sense of a dangerously rising Stoic movement. This movement became prominent only in the latter half of the sixteenth century.

[3] The rise of Neostoicism

In the last decades of the sixteenth century, from the 1570s onwards, a new intellectual movement arose which historians have called

Neostoicism. It had its origins in Europe, where its main figures were Michel de Montaigne (in his early essays, written in the mid-1570s, published 1580), Justus Lipsius (De constantia, 1584; Manuductio ad Stoicam philosophiam, 1604), Guillaume du Vair (La philosophie morale des stoïques, 1585; De la constance, 1604), and Pierre Charron (De la sagesse, 1601); they were followed by such lesser English figures as Joseph Hall and Sir William Cornwallis.³⁴

The origins of the Neostoic movement are obscure. A. H. T. Levi, for instance, stresses the continuity of the movement with earlier Florentine and humanist traditions, seeing a shift in emphasis rather than substance: "There is a more frequent and more general recourse to the moral maxims and principles of the stoics, a more systematic attempt to adapt them to orthodox Christian sentiment.³⁵ But the stoicism was not pure...." Nevertheless, the changes in emphasis were significant.

The main change was a new interest in Stoicism as an intellectual movement in its own right, rather than simply as an element in the eclectic humanist synthesis. Rediscovered writers such as Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius came into prominence; serious philosophers like Lipsius made an attempt to recover the original doctrines of the Greek Stoics, and to reconstruct Stoicism in its integrity - physics, logic, and epistemology as well as the familiar ethical doctrines. There was a more systematic and rigorous attempt to reconcile Stoicism with Christianity, and to demonstrate that doctrines which the Augustinian tradition had regarded as unchristian, such as the extirpation of the passions, the doctrine of fate, and the ideal of the sapiens, were in fact compatible with Christianity.

On a more popular level, the essential feature of the movement is a stress on Seneca rather than Cicero as the chief spokesman for Stoicism. Ralph Graham Palmer sums up the change with reference to England:

Sixteenth-century Englishmen had loved Cicero for his humanity, his broad view, his participation in great events, his normality, his conception of duties. Englishmen of the early seventeenth century, on the other hand, were attracted by a moralist who possessed a finely-developed critical sense, who stood serene and aloof, who depended on himself against outer circumstance.³⁶

The philosophical shift goes along with a change in literary fashions: a preference, in the later years of the century, for "Senecan" styles of writing and argument (abrupt, pointed, paradoxical, deliberately inelegant), in reaction against the Ciceronianism of the earlier humanists. The new style is practiced by writers like Montaigne and Lipsius, and prevalent among most of the English Neostoic writers. It reflects a reaction against the public, oratorical style of the humanists, towards a style more capable of rendering individual personality and experience.³⁷

The result of this change of allegiance from Cicero to Seneca was a new stress on the harsher and more individualistic doctrines of Stoicism, on the endurance of suffering and death, and on the heroic virtue of the sapiens. In particular, the virtue of constancy comes to be emphasised, in a strikingly new way, as the key to virtue and happiness. Levi notes as a new feature towards the end of the sixteenth century "a vogue for titles with a stoic resonance. Treatises with a reference to self-knowledge in the title multiply, the first discourses on constancy appear, there is frequent reference to tranquillity of mind."³⁸ Neostoic "constancy" (which I shall discuss in more detail in the next chapter) clearly derives primarily from Seneca's constantia. It implies passive resistance to evils, and a personal and individual response, rather than the active and civic virtue cultivated by the earlier humanists; it also, as we will see, tends to involve an exaltation of the capacity of the wise man for self-perfection.

Why did the Neostoic movement arise when it did? There is no simple

answer. The most obvious and probably the most important explanation is political. The movement had its origins in France and the Low Countries, which, in the last decades of the sixteenth century, were suffering from prolonged wars (foreign and civil), social disorder and anarchy, and natural disasters such as plague and famine. In such circumstances, when life and freedom are under continual threat and there is no external order to rely on, people turn to a philosophy which locates happiness in self-reliance and indifference to external evils - as, indeed, they turned originally to Stoicism in the disorder of the Hellenistic world. This is Montaigne's explanation:

True-perfect liberty, is, for one to be able to doe and work all things upon himselfe. Potentissimus est qui se habet in potestate (SEN. Ep. ix). Hee is of most power, that keepes himselfe in his owne power. In ordinary and peacefull times, a man prepares himselfe for common and moderate accidents: but in this confusion, wherein we have beene these thirty yeeres, every French man, be it in generall or in particular, doth hourelly see himselfe upon the point of his fortunes overthrow and downfall. By so much more ought each one have his courage stored, and his minde fraughted, with more strong and vigorous provisions....³⁹

Lipsius' and Du Vair's treatises on constancy imply the same motivation, for both are dialogues set against a background of political disaster and dealing primarily with constancy in "public evils." It seems clear that one of the immediate causes of the Neostoic revival was a pressing need for a philosophy to give comfort in times of external upheaval - and this explanation is also implied in Shakespeare's treatment of the constancy theme, especially in Antony and Cleopatra.

Nevertheless, obviously "the roots of seventeenth-century Stoicism lie deeper than the events of a generation."⁴⁰ Some scholars, like Levi, stress its continuity with the humanist exploration of classical philosophy and the Alexandrian tradition of reconciling Christian and pagan thought. Others prefer to link it with new and radical modes of

thought. Rudolf Kirk emphasises the connections between Neostoicism and Protestantism, though this is somewhat undermined by the fact that several leading Neostoics were Catholic, and by the concern of Protestants such as Calvin and Luther to distance themselves from Stoicism.⁴¹ Léontine Zanta, in her pioneering study of the revival of Stoicism, stressed the place of Neostoicism in the line of development, stretching from early Renaissance philosophers like Pomponazzi to the Enlightenment, of a secular, rationalistic system of morality (la morale indépendante). There is undoubtedly some truth in this in the long-term view, but it is hardly the way the movement was seen either by its exponents or its contemporaries.

The causes of Neostoicism, and its place in the history of philosophy, are questions too large to be adequately dealt with here. What seems beyond dispute is the appeal that Stoic ideas had for many readers both in Europe and England in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries.

[4] Neostoicism and anti-Stoicism in England

The rise of Neostoicism in England in the 1590s is harder to explain than its continental origins, for England was comparatively free from the disasters which gave the movement its impetus in France and the Low Countries. It can be seen, like the contemporary vogue for satire, tragedy, and black comedy, as reflecting a fin de siècle anxiety and melancholy associated with the political, religious, and economic troubles of the end of Elizabeth's reign. More speculatively, it could be argued that there is something in English tradition or character that responds sympathetically to the idea of Stoic constancy. Though the word "constance" only entered English in the fourteenth century, "steadfast" is as old as The Battle of Maldon, and Old English poetry has a strangely

Stoic moral atmosphere, in its celebration of the power of a heroic spirit to stand fast against overwhelming odds and win a glory which will last despite the transience of earthly things. The traditional and medieval theme of mutability and the destructive effects of time, and the search for something constant and stable which will outlast them, is one of the chief preoccupations of Elizabethan literature. It is most memorably stated in Spenser's "Mutability Cantos," which, according to the published text, were to form part of a "Legend of Constancy." The value the Elizabethans placed on constancy, and its sometimes ironic contrast with reality, is epitomised in the Senecan motto of the notoriously vacillating Elizabeth herself: "Semper eadem."⁴²

Whatever the reasons, Neostoicism quickly became influential in England. The appearance of Stradling's translation of Lipsius' De constantia in 1595 "may be taken as the date when Seneca's moral ideas began to be felt intensively among the Elizabethans."⁴³ It was followed by Du Vair's Philosophie morale des Stoïques in 1598, Montaigne's Essays in 1603, and Seneca's complete moral works, in Lipsius' edition, translated by Lodge in 1614. In the early years of the new century, English works under Neostoic influence began to appear, by Hall, Cornwallis, and others.

The most obvious influence, however, was in the theatre, in dramatists such as Jonson, Chapman, Marston, and of course Shakespeare. Jonson was strongly influenced by Senecan Stoicism and (directly or indirectly) by Lipsius and the Neostoics.⁴⁴ Constancy, stable and unchanging self-reliance, is one of his central ethical values:

Be alwayes to thy gather'd selfe the same...

That whatsoever face thy fate puts on,
Thou shrinke or start not, but be alwayes one...⁴⁵

At the same time, his dramatic practice does not always bear out his

theoretical beliefs, and his rigid, single-minded "humour" characters can be seen as figures of constancy run mad.⁴⁶ Chapman, though more Neoplatonist than Neostoic, was influenced by Seneca and Epictetus, and attempted to make the Stoic sapiens a dramatic hero in Clermont (The Revenge of Bussy)⁴⁷ and Cato (Caesar and Pompey).

Marston's relationship to Stoicism was more erratic. He quotes Seneca and Epictetus in his satires, and Sophonisba (1606) is a Roman tragedy full of Stoic sentiments.⁴⁸ Yet he also mocks Seneca in The Malcontent, as a man who "writ of Temperance and Fortitude, yet lived like a voluptuous Epicure, and died like an effeminate coward." In Antonio's Revenge he dramatically shows the inadequacy of Stoic constancy, as the stoical Pandulpho, after responding to tragedy with maxims from Seneca's De remediis fortuitorum, breaks down and weeps:

Man will breake out, despite philosophie.
 Why, all this while I ha but plaid a part,
 Like to some boy, that actes a tragedie,
 Speakes burly words, and raves out passion;
 But when he thinks upon his infant weaknesse,
 He droopes his eye. I spake more then a god.
 Yet am lesse then a man.
 I am the miserablest sowle that breathes.⁴⁹

Marston seems to have had a violent love/hate relationship with Senecan Stoicism, and a sense, like Shakespeare, of its propensity for role-playing and self-deception. His shifting attitudes show the Elizabethan ambivalence in an almost schizophrenic form.

This is not, however, the only aspect of Stoic influence in drama. When Herschel Baker says that the popular appeal of Stoicism "is reflected more clearly in the mighty line of Marlowe, Shakespeare, and Chapman than in the sober prose of Lipsius or Du Vair," he refers not so much to the explicit use of Neostoic ideas as to the vogue for "Senecan" characters: individualistic hero-villains, who pursue an ideal of constancy and

selfhood at any cost. As Barish comments, "Sixteenth-century English drama regularly recommends constancy as a virtue - constancy, even as it may be, in ill-doing, just as one finds changeability, even in virtue, to

be a fault."⁵¹ This kind of amoral heroism may seem totally incongruous with the ethical teachings of Seneca or Lipsius; yet it is a genuine, if distorted, response to the Senecan and Neostoic ideal of constancy, with its stress on individualism, self-reliance, and contempt for the world.

It was partly, perhaps, a recognition that Stoicism could lead to such amoral individualism which produced a strong anti-Stoic reaction in the early seventeenth century. The old Augustinian objections were restated with a new urgency. Marston, for instance, in an anti-Stoic mood, bitterly attacks the arrogance of the Stoic claim that man can attain virtue by his own efforts, and overnight at that:

I will, cries Zeno, ô presumption!
I can, thou maist, dogged opinion
 Of thwarting Cynicks. To day vicious,
 List to their precepts, next day vertuous.
 Peace Seneca, thou belchest blasphemy.
To live from God, but to live happily
 (I heare thee boast,) from thy Phylosophie,
And from thy selfe, ô ravening lunacie!⁵²

As Sidney Warhaft comments, Marston's attack "shows more clearly than could any amount of totaling up of followers or tracing of influences that stoicism was truly a force to be reckoned with by 1599."⁵³ Later in the century, we find Sir Thomas Browne complaining that Stoic doctrines now "passe for currant Divinity," and another critic writing in 1636,

...Stoicall Divinity ... is, in some branches, so largely sprouted up againe, that, they are supposed to be ancient & orthodoxe principles of Christianity; and so are they cryed up by a multitude of modern voices, that few beleeve, Antiquity ever mentioned ought in contradiction to what they fancie to be the Truth.⁵⁴

The conflict between Christian Stoicism and the Augustinian anti-Stoic tradition was to continue through the seventeenth century, well beyond the scope of this study.⁵⁵ Perhaps, though, the shock of the impact of the revival of Stoicism was never greater than in the 1590s and 1600s, when it first began to make its presence felt in England - the years of Shakespeare's Roman plays.

Shakespeare's treatment of Stoicism and constancy may owe nothing directly to the works of Lipsius, Du Vair, Hall, and the rest; but it seems unlikely that he would have written about Rome in quite the same way if the Neostoic movement had not been a living influence in England. His treatment seems to echo the twofold emphasis of the Neostoics, on Stoicism as a historical phenomenon and as a philosophy with modern relevance. Shakespeare, though he follows the humanist eclectic tradition in his lack of concern for philosophical details, attempts to reconstruct the Roman Stoic ethic in its historical context, without an admixture of Christianity. At the same time, he is aware that modern writers are urging constancy as a response to the problems of his own day, and his critique of ancient Roman constancy is also a critique of contemporary Neostoicism.

In the next two chapters I shall look briefly at four leading Neostoic writers, exploring what they mean by "constancy," then in more detail at Montaigne, for whom constancy and inconstancy are central ideas throughout his career. Chronologically, perhaps, Montaigne should be dealt with first, for he was one of the founders of Neostoicism. Unlike the others, however, he moves beyond that philosophy to a position half-Augustinian, half-Epicurean, which seems closely parallel to the attitudes of Shakespeare discussed in the final section of this thesis.

CHAPTER SIX

CONSTANCY AND OPINION:

FOUR NEOSTOICS

In this chapter I propose to look at works by four Neostoic writers: Justus Lipsius' De constantia (1584, translated 1595),¹ Guillaume du Vair's La philosophie morale des Stoiques (1585, translated 1598)² and De la constance és calamitez publiques (1604, translated 1622),³ Joseph Hall's Heaven upon Earth; or, Of true Peace and Tranquillitie of Minde (1606),⁴ and Sir William Cornwallis's Essayes (1600-1, revised and expanded 1606 and 1610).⁵ All of these works were circulating in England (and all except De la constance in English) during the 1590s and 1600s. I am not concerned to argue that Shakespeare directly knew any of these books (though it is at least possible that he read Lipsius). They illustrate, however, a climate of thought and a set of preoccupations that was very prevalent at the time in which he was writing the Roman plays, and which he could hardly have avoided being aware of. Two aspects of Neostoic thought seem particularly relevant to the Roman plays: first, their advocacy of "constancy," of the Senecan Stoic brand, as a response to adversity and in particular to political chaos; second, their stress upon "opinion" as a corrupting force opposed to constancy. More emphatically than the classical Stoics, the Neostoics associate constancy with questions of knowledge, opinion, and error, and so anticipate the

linking of these themes in the Roman plays.

I shall divide my treatment of these Neostoic works into three sections. The first will deal with the nature of constancy, as defined by Lipsius and Du Vair. The second, drawing mainly on Du Vair and Cornwallis, will examine more closely the idea of opinion and its relationship to constancy. The third will briefly suggest the problem for the Neostoics of reconciling Stoicism with Christianity, with particular reference to Hall's Heaven upon Earth.

[1] "To be immooveable": Lipsius and Du Vair on constancy

Neostoic constancy is best summed up, and its appeal to late sixteenth-century readers best evoked, in Lipsius' De constantia. Justus Lipsius (1547-1606), a Belgian, was one of the leading humanist scholars of the sixteenth century and, as Zanta called him, "le fondateur du néo-stoïcisme." His works include an introduction to Stoicism, an account of Stoic physics, a political treatise, an edition of Tacitus, and, most influentially, an edition of Seneca (1604) which "was the chief instrument of the extraordinary diffusion of Seneca's influence throughout the seventeenth century." His volatile personality, and a career marked by continual travel to escape political unrest and several politic changes of religion, were in marked contrast with his ideal of constancy - an irony noted by contemporaries like Hall, who in his satirical travelogue Mundus alter et idem attributed to the natives of "Fooliana the Fickle" a coin bearing the image of a chameleon and the inscription "Const[antia]
⁷
Lips[ii]."

The brief, early dialogue De constantia was Lipsius' most popular work; it was translated into every major European language, and went

through eighty editions in the next three centuries. Set against the background of war and political turmoil in the Low Countries, it aims to provide "consolations against publick evils."⁹ Lipsius presents his younger self (hereafter called "Justus") as resolving to leave his homeland, unable to endure any longer the sufferings he sees around him. His older friend Langius rejects this plan as foolish: "I had rather thou wouldst hearken to the voyce of wisdom and reason. For these mists and cloudes that thus compass thee, doe proceede from the smoake of OPINIONS."¹⁰ It is impossible, he urges, to run away from suffering, for its causes are not in the outside world but in the mind:

Would you faine change countries? nay rather change your owne mind wrongfully subjected to affections, and withdrawne from the naturall obedience to his lawfull Ladie, I mean REASON. ... Above all things it behooveth thee to be CONSTANT: For, by fighting many man hath gotten the victory, but none by flying.¹¹

From the start Lipsius reminds us of the root meaning of "constancy" (standing firm, remaining in place), and links this quality of steadfastness with reason rather than emotion ("affections") and "OPINIONS."

These associations are drawn out in the tightly-packed chapter of definitions which follows. Constancy is defined as

a right and immoveable strength of the minde, neither lifted up, nor pressed down with externall or casuall accidentes,

which arises out of patience,

A voluntarie sufferance without grudging of all things whatsoever can happen to, or in a man] This being regulated by the rule of Right Reason, is the verie roote whereupon is settled the high and mighty bodie of that fair oake CONSTANCIE.¹²

After briefly distinguishing true constancy from obstinacy, and true patience from the "abjection and basenesse of a dastardlie minde," Lipsius

turns to the most fundamental contrast, between Right Reason, defined as "A true sense and judgement of thinges humane and divine," and its opposite, Opinion, "A false and frivolous conjecture of those thinges." For Lipsius these are mighty opposites, linked to the Platonic dichotomy of soul and body, the heavenly and earthly part of man. Soul and body are joined in "jarring concord," perpetually fighting for mastery, from which conflict arise all the disturbances of the human mind; and in this conflict "The captains are, REASON and OPINION."¹³

Reason, "the perfection of the soule," derives from heaven, from the divine fire of God, and its sparks in man naturally rise up towards heaven. Hence it always directs us towards good. It is constant in virtue, "resolute and immoveable in a good purpose, not variable in judgment, ever shunning or seeking one and the selfe same thing...." Opinion, on the other hand, derives from "the filth of the bodie and contagion of the senses." The soul is gradually corrupted by its association with the body, and

is therby by litle and little deprived of her dignity, addicted and coupled unto the senses, and of this impure commixtion OPINION is ingendred in us, Which is nought els but a vaine image and shadow of reason: whose seat is the Sences: whose birth is the earth.¹⁴

Whereas reason always strives upward, opinion always tends downward to its origin in the earth, and hence it is vicious and inconstant:

It is vaine, uncertaine, deceitfull, evill in counsell, evill in judgement. It depriveth the mind of Constancie and veritie. To day it desireth a thing, to morrow it defieth the same. ... It hath no respect to sound judgment, but to please the bodie, and content the senses.¹⁵

Both in ideas and in tone this seems to anticipate Coriolanus' denunciation of the plebeians:

your affections are
 A sick man's appetite, who desires most that
 Which would increase his evil. ...
 With every minute you do change a mind
 And call him noble that was now your hate,
 Him vile that was your garland.¹⁶

Inconstant, irrational opinion is the cause of all human unhappiness: "By the meanes of it wee are troubled with cares, distracted with perturbations, over-ruled by vices." If a man wishes to live a virtuous life he must cast out opinion; otherwise he is in the condition of an unballasted ship, "continuallie floting on the waves of doubtfulness, without any certain resolution, murmuring, troublesome, injurious to God & men."¹⁷

I shall discuss in the next section precisely what Lipsius understands by "opinion"; at this point I wish only to draw attention to his insistent contrast between stability and change. It is because opinion is inconstant and changeable that it is the arch-enemy of constancy, the prime virtue. Lipsius' "constancy," like Seneca's constantia (from which it clearly derives), is a quality of moral immovability. The constant man is stable in convictions, unmoved by emotion, "neither lifted up nor pressed down" by external events, and, hence, steadfast and immovable in adversity. Langius urges Justus to drink from the "cup" of constancy,

wherewith thou shalt expell the memorie of all cares and sorrowes, and whereof when thou hast once taken a taste, being firmelie settled against all casualties, bearing thy selfe upright in all misfortunes, neither puffed up nor pressed downe with either fortune, thou maist challenge to thy selfe that great title, the neerest that man can have to God, To be immooveable.¹⁸

Lipsius later provides a gloss on these words when he describes God as "stayed, resolute and immutable, alwaies one, and like himselfe, not wavering or varying in those thinges which once he willed and foresawe. For, The eternall God never changeth his minde, saith Homer."¹⁹ In this

sense, as well as in the Senecan sense of being tranquil and unperturbed by earthly things, Lipsius' constant man is like God. This passage reproduces exactly (without concessions to Christianity) the tone of Seneca's De constantia sapientis, with its paradoxical coexistence of humble submission to fate and godlike aspiration. It also anticipates the tone of Caesar's "northern star" speech, and makes it easy to see the tradition upon which Shakespeare was drawing when, without warrant from Plutarch, he placed this boast of constancy in Caesar's mouth.

Why, though, is Lipsius so concerned with being constant and "immoveable"? The reasons become clearer in the main body of De constantia, the object of which is to demonstrate that "publick evils" should not cause us grief, since they are providentially willed, necessary, and beneficial. Arguing that political upheaval is natural and necessary, Langius points out that "it is a naturall propertie to all things created, to fall into mutabilitie and alteration," and so launches into a tremendous rhetorical set-piece on the subject of universal mutability. Novas in the heavens, tides and floods, earthquakes, the rise and fall of islands from the sea, all show that nothing in the world is permanent, for God "would have nothing firm and stable but himself
20
alone." If this is true of the natural world, it is all the more true of human political institutions. Cities and empires continually rise and fall; even Rome, "(falsly tearmed everlasting) where is she? Overwhelmed, pulled downe, burned, over-flowed: Shee is perished with more than one kinde of destruction...." Langius rises to an apostrophe to the necessity which governs these changes:

O the law of NECESSITY, woonderfull, and not to be comprehended:
All things run into this fatall whirlepoole of ebbing and flowing:
And some things in this world are long lasting, but not
everlasting. ... [B]eholde the alterations of all humaine affares:
and the swelling and swaging of them as of the sea. Arise thou:

fal thou: rule thou: obey thou: hide thou thy head: lift thou up
 thine and let this wheel of changeable things run round, so long
 as this round world remayneth.²¹

Justus weeps, overcome by a sense of the vanity of earthly achievements and the brevity and insignificance of human life: "What is it to be some bodie? what is it to be no bodie? Man is a shadowe and a dreame." This is not, however, the moral Langius intends him to draw:

But thou young man doe not onely contemplate on these things; but contemne them. Imprint CONSTANCIE in thy mind amid this casuall and inconstant variableness of all things.

Langius, it is true, immediately qualifies this with the reflection that the inconstancy is only apparent: "I call it inconstant in respect of our understanding and judgment: for that if thou looke unto God and his providence, all things succeed in a stedd²² and immoveable order." This does not, however, negate the effect of the preceding pages. More clearly perhaps than any of the classical Stoics, Lipsius here conveys the necessity for constancy, in a world of continual change and dissolution, where nothing is stable or to be relied upon but the rock-like strength of the human mind. The apocalyptic imagery of the passage and its dreamlike sense of universal dissolution are reminiscent of Antony and Cleopatra, especially of the passage in which Antony, facing death, feels his identity dissolving like the clouds, like "a shadowe and a dreame." It is in such a world, where even "everlasting" Rome proves unstable, that Antony and Coriolanus clutch at Stoic constancy for support.

In contrast with Lipsius, Guillaume du Vair (1556-1621) was as prominent as a politician and orator as he was as a writer and scholar. As a member of the Paris Parlement he took an active part in the French

wars of religion, often as a mediator and peacemaker, and was later (1603) made bishop of Marseille by Henri IV. His works, which also include La sainte philosophie and a translation of Epictetus' Manual (on which La philosophie morale is largely based), went through fifteen editions between 1610 and 1641. His reputation and his writing suggest a gentle and reasonable man, Brutus to Lipsius' Cassius.²³

Despite the differences between the two men, Du Vair's De la constance²⁴ resembles Lipsius' De constantia as closely as their titles suggest. It too is a dialogue on constancy in public evils, set against a vividly depicted background of political turmoil (the siege of Paris by Henri IV in 1590), with the author taking the role of the reluctant Stoic being argued into constancy by his wiser friends.

At the outset Du Vair portrays himself as renouncing his former Neostoic allegiances, convinced by experience that constancy is both an unnaturally cold and an impotent response to national tragedy: "in such fits as these, Nature and our Philosophy cannot agree together.... [A] man whose eyes are without moisture at this present, had need to have a heart of stone...."²⁵ Unlike Justus in De constantia (who is a mere straw man), the objector to Stoicism in De la constance is allowed to put his case with powerful eloquence. The rest of the dialogue, however, contains his friends' reply. While they concede emotions are natural and not to be wholly extirpated, they must be kept within bounds and not allowed to "overflow the soule."²⁶ Excessive sorrow is not in fact the product of nature, but of opinion; it "would insinuate her selfe under the name of Nature" but in fact "is an Enemy to her" and only increases rather than eases pain.²⁷ It can only be dismissed by a clear-sighted, rational understanding of the nature of public evils.

The body of De la constance, like De constantia, therefore attempts to demonstrate that public evils are necessary and providentially willed, and

thus to inculcate constancy in facing them. Du Vair represents this constancy by means of a vivid image: that of a soldier who was pierced by so many arrows that, though dead, he remained standing stiffly upright, and by his apparent inability to be killed terrified his enemies into flight. Constancy converts defeat into victory:

The afflictions that are borne constantly, and with the counterpoyse of reason, doe maintayne us straight and strong: and whereas without them, we should bow too much to the earth, they set us up againe, and lift us to heaven. For wee have nothing that giveth us so sure a testimonie of the immortalitie of our soules, and a glance more evidently of the hope of eternall life, then the courage that is infused into us by constancie; which exhorting us to brave and generous actions, and unto patience, seemeth forthwith to propose unto us the reward, and give us a secret feeling of the place, where we ought to expect it. Which is not in this wretched and mortall world.... But above in heaven in a permanent Cittie....²⁸

This association between Stoic constancy and Christian salvation (strikingly different in tone from Seneca or indeed from Lipsius) is taken up in the conclusion of the work, which argues for the immortality of the soul. Du Vair uses the Stoic image of the soul as a celestial fire whose sparks aspire to rise upward: "A mans whole life ... is nothing else, but a striving and contention of the Soule ... to repaire that weake mortalitie of the body by the participation of eternall things."²⁹ Man strives to emulate the qualities and virtues which God absolutely possesses (among them constancy), and to

unite and conforme himselfe as much as hee can, to that eldest and incomprehensible Divine Essence. Which caused the Auncient Zoroaster to crie out in amazement,

O mortall man, thy boldnesse is extreame.

As beeing not able to comprehend that in this low and mortall World, amongst Filth and Dust; there could be found so strong a nature, that should rayse her selfe above the Heavens, and by the knowledge of so many things, and imitation of divine actions, should almost Deifie her selfe in this life.³⁰

Audaciously, Du Vair fuses Christian ideas of immortality and salvation

with the Senecan Stoic ideal of self-perfection and self-deification through virtue. In Du Vair, as in Lipsius, "constancy" is not only patient submission to external evils, but a supreme virtue by which the human mind can imitate the perfection of God, become superior to all earthly things, and "almost Deifie her selfe in this life."

There are obvious differences in ideas and in tone between Lipsius and Du Vair, and their presentation of constancy. The "Tranquillity" which Hall preaches in Heaven upon Earth, and the "Resolution" and "Patience" which Cornwallis praises in his essays, are significantly different
 31
 again. Nevertheless, all these Neostoic works celebrate essentially the same ideal. They all believe in constancy as an "immoveable strength of the mind," which is not merely desirable, but the only adequate response to political disaster, and one which not only enables those who practice it to survive, but positively raises them to godlike stature. They also agree that the crucial obstacle to be overcome before constancy can be achieved is the power of opinion. To this concept I turn in the next section.

[2] "Opinion that is constant never"

The Neostoic concept of opinion derives from the fundamental Stoic principle that, in Epictetus' words, "What disturbs men's minds is not events but their judgements on events," and that, to attain happiness, we need only change our judgements of what is good and bad; ultimately, it derives from the Platonic dichotomy of knowledge and opinion. It is the Neostoics, however, who place a peculiar emphasis on this doctrine, and turn Opinion (with a capital letter) into a personified abstraction which
 32
 is made responsible for all human ills.

Lipsius identifies "Opinion" as the arch-enemy of constancy. What does he mean by the word? Since "Opinion" is associated with the body rather than the soul, and its "seat is the Sences," it seems primarily to mean judgements made on a basis of sense-perceptions and instinctive responses to physical pleasure and pain, rather than of the moral consciousness which we derive from right reason. Judging on this basis, opinion endorses our instinctive but false beliefs, for instance, that pain and death are evils, or that wealth and power are desirable. Because it responds to external stimuli, which are continually changing, it is changeable and unstable, and so "depriveth the mind of Constancie and veritie."

Opinion, however, is not only an internal force in the individual's mind; it is also the external power of public opinion - that is, the beliefs held by the "foolish" and unenlightened majority of humanity, who are guided by opinion rather than reason, and whose judgements are therefore false and fickle. Thus, when Langius tells Justus that he is befogged by the "smoake of OPINIONS," he means both that he is being guided by unthinking emotion and instinct rather than reason, and that he is foolishly accepting commonly held fallacies.

Du Vair gives a more detailed account of the workings of opinion in De la constance, making clear the connections between perception and moral judgement, and between public opinion ("the fond opinion of the Vulgar") and "Opinion" as a psychological process. Our senses are the "Sentinels of the Soule," but they perceive "not the true and internall Nature, but onely the superficial and externall forme of things." Therefore

they present their Idea's unto the Soule with favour, and even with a fore-judgement of their qualitie, according as they appeare severally pleasing and gracefull to them; and not as they are profitable and necessarie to the universall well-fare of man: and moreover, let in with the Idea's, the fond opinion of the Vulgar; from whence is framed, that inconsiderate Opinion we have of things, that they are good or bad, profitable or hurtfull, to be

imitated, or to be shunned, which certainly is a dangerous guide, and rash mistresse to follow, and justly such as our Belleau hath set it forth.

Opinion that is constant never,
That workes in vaine, and striveth ever:
That buildes her selfe a firme assurance,
Upon the sands of light inconstance.

As a result, Opinion is enabled to seize the citadel of the mind and
 34
 tyrannise over it.

This emphasis on "the fond opinion of the Vulgar" as a power which corrupts the moral judgement leads the Neostoics to a preoccupation with problems of public opinion, reputation, and honour. Du Vair's discussion of honour in La philosophie morale des stoiques is closely based upon Cicero's in the Tusculans and De officiis, and shows the same moral
 35
 ambiguities. True honour is "the glittering & beaming brightnes of a good and vertuous action," which is reflected back to us from the reactions of others "and so by a reflexion in our selves, brings us a
 36
 testimonie from others of the good opinion which they have of us...." As Cassius argues to Brutus (and Ulysses to Achilles), "the eye sees not
 37
 itself / But by reflection." We can only see ourselves as we are reflected in the opinions of others; nevertheless, true honour is an accurate reflection and a genuine form of self-knowledge. The danger is that we will come to act for the sake of others' opinions; then

wee doe but embrace a shadowe instead of a bodie, and fasten the rest of our minds upon the opinion of the vulgar sort of people, and so voluntarily renounce our liberties, to serve the humours and passions of other men ... so that our affections are hanged upon the eyes of other men: and wee love not vertue, but as the common people doe love and favour it....³⁸

We must remember that virtue is its own reward, "that the fruit of noble actions is to bee sayd to have performed them most nobly, and that vertue cannot finde out of her selfe any recompence sufficient to guerdon her
 39
 selfe withall." Nevertheless, this formulation ("to be sayd") returns

us to the opinions of others.

The problems and paradoxes in both Cicero's and Du Vair's discussions are no doubt inherent in the concept of "honour" itself. It is a straightforward concept only so long as it is agreed that moral standards are absolute, that right reason leads infallibly to correct moral judgements, and that the standards of one's own society are identical with these moral absolutes. As soon as these certainties are questioned, when it is suggested that moral judgements may be questionable and subjective and that the standards of a society may be relative rather than absolute, then "honour" becomes problematic. Such questions, of course, are inevitably raised when Shakespeare depicts ancient Rome in a historical perspective, as a society with its own moral code which is not identical with that of his audience.

The essays of Cornwallis show perhaps most clearly the Neostoic preoccupation with opinion and honour. Sir William Cornwallis the younger (?1579-1614), a country gentleman's son, was knighted on Essex's Irish campaign, became a member of Parliament, lived extravagantly, fathered eleven children, and died in debt. His Essayes, partly inspired by Montaigne's and (like Montaigne's) heavily influenced by Senecan Stoicism, were published in 1600-1 and (again like Montaigne's) revised and expanded over the following decade. As a Neostoic moralist who is also a young Elizabethan gentleman, Cornwallis recurs with a particular intensity to the moral problems and conflicts involved in honour and reputation.

Cornwallis stresses the Neostoic distinction between knowledge and opinion. Knowledge, for him, is the key to happiness and virtue.

Knowledge feares not but what is to bee feared, loves not but what is worthy for to bee beloved, knowes all thinges, and to all thinges renders his due, and with tranquillitie lives, and without admiration sees, and without sorrow feeles all the shapes and apparitions of the world. ... How admirable is this vertue, which

governes here so wisely as no shot nor tempest of the world can batter her.⁴¹

It leads to godlike constancy:

To know himselfe and the appurtenaunces to himself is the use of knowledge, and this knowledge unmaskes his eyes & shews him wonders in himselfe. He becomes in this like unto God. ... To know himselfe, is to know before hand what may happen to himselfe; so shall he in despite of the apparitions of the world stand unmoveable....⁴²

Opinion, on the other hand, is "the straungest thing of the world, and yet it is nothing.... a monster, halfe Truthe and halfe Falshood." It is "the mother of Hipocrisie"; its followers "often goe like vertue, speake like Vertue, doo like Vertue, but that is where Vertue is in fashion; for as it alters, they alter; they love not her, but Opinion." They are foolish, absurd, and pitiable, for they are continually tormented by anxiety, relying as they do on something that is fickle and unreliable. Those who seek Stoic wisdom and tranquillity should "not beleeeve any thing rashly," and should aspire to be described as Sallust described Cato:

"Esse quam videri bonus malebat" (He preferred being good to being thought good).⁴³ Cornwallis here makes it clear that "opinion" is not merely a psychological force leading to false moral judgements, but also concern for public reputation.

Cornwallis recurs repeatedly to the moral dangers of reliance on popular opinion. A man who, instead of being guided by a true knowledge of his duty, is "like a feather governed by the breath of men," is in a dangerous position,

Since he is aloft by the pleasure of others (a dangerous estate, for with danger they stand that stand not upon themselves), his foundation is the many headed multitude, a foundation both in respect of their number and nature uncertaine and, consequently, dangerous.⁴⁴

Such a man cannot be constant:

It is impossible that the motions of a minde led onely by fame should be otherwise then a trembling, unsetled thing. ... Inconstant they must bee, for they fetch all their determinations from the countenances of other men and upon them build either by scornfull lookes or the basest, basest dejections.

Among such seekers of fame Cornwallis especially singles out those who cultivate a reputation for gravity and wisdom:

It is oddes, but they act their partes first by themselves and after get them by heart. They spitte all one way, and upon no occasion will alter the tune of their hemmes and coughes. ... Never laugh - let the occasion bee never so just; their eyes must never make a turne but gallop right forward. In a word, they are lockt up in formality, & barred is the chest, where they are inclosed with the eyes of men. Were there a more substantialnesse of Fame then there is, this were a deare earning of it to deny the course of nature in these indifferent thinges.⁴⁵

This passage seems to echo parts of the opening scene of The Merchant of Venice.⁴⁶ The behaviour Cornwallis ridicules (never to "alter," never to "make a turne," and so on) could, of course, be interpreted as "constant." Cornwallis betrays a sense that Stoic constancy may in itself be a matter of role-playing and pretence, directed towards being "dressed in an opinion" of wisdom and virtue rather than towards the reality. It is not, however, an insight which he develops.

"Opinion," in Neostoic writing, is both an epistemological process which distorts our perceptions of the world and hence our moral judgements, and the power of public opinion, which also corrupts by inducing us to be concerned less with moral reality and self-knowledge than with how our actions will appear to others. The Neostoics thus bring together, more emphatically and explicitly than the classical Stoics, the theme of constancy with another dominant theme of the Roman plays: that of

knowledge, opinion, and judgement, of the dangers of "misconstruing" reality and of allowing one's moral judgements to be swayed by the opinions of others. The Neostoics, however, draw a black-and-white distinction between the virtue of constancy and the evil of Opinion. Shakespeare, perhaps drawing on Montaigne, suggests that the pursuit of constancy, the desire to appear immovable and "like oneself," may lead not to liberation from opinion but to an increased dependence upon it.

[3] Constancy and grace

As "Christian Stoics," all the authors I have dealt with in this chapter face the central problem of reconciling their Stoic ethics with their Christianity. The Stoic ideal of self-perfection through constancy, as we have seen in the attacks of Augustine and his successors, is potentially at odds with the Christian doctrine that man can only be saved by unmerited grace.

Lipsius does not seriously confront this problem. His Neostoicism seems barely different from classical Stoicism: though he attempts to distinguish the Stoic doctrine of fate from Christian providence, the distinction is one of wire-drawn subtlety; and he does not shy away on Christian grounds from such controversial Stoic doctrines as the condemnation of pity.⁴⁷ His concluding prayer is to "that eternal and celestial Fire" - a being resembling the abstract Stoic Reason or Nature as much as the Christian personal God.⁴⁸ As far as possible, Lipsius ignores or plays down any potential conflict between Stoicism and Christianity.

Du Vair (who was to become a bishop) displays (in Levi's words) "an authentic and personal Christianity" which one does not feel in Lipsius,

and his debate about Stoic constancy in the opening pages of De la constance is much more sensitive to possible Christian objections to the Stoic ideal.⁴⁹ I have already looked at the ending of that book, in which Du Vair does not simply take over the aspirations of pagan Stoicism, but boldly fuses them with the Christian aspiration to salvation and personal immortality. In the last pages of La philosophie morale, Du Vair finally acknowledges that Stoicism is insufficient in itself:

such is the nature of things created, by reason of the naturall infirmitie and weakenes which they doe carrie about with them, that the good which God bestoweth upon us as soone as we are borne, doth daily waste and consume away, unlesse it be continually repayred and supplied by the flowing streames of his bounty and liberality which runne continually: and ... our naturall forces can never bee sufficient of themselves to keepe us in this perfection ...

Perfection cannot be achieved without divine grace; and therefore Du Vair concludes his treatise with a prayer, much more explicitly Christian in tone than Lipsius', for God to give us grace to follow "the true and everlasting good, which shall continue for ever and ever."⁵⁰

These Christian qualifications of Neostoicism are carried much further by Joseph Hall (1574-1656): the "English Seneca," the leading English exponent of Neostoicism and Senecan prose style, a satirist, moralist, and controversialist,⁵¹ and in later life (like Du Vair) a bishop. His position is paradoxical, mixing Neostoic ethics with traditional anti-Stoic criticisms of Stoic pride and impotence. Unlike Du Vair, who acknowledges only at the end of La philosophie morale that the moral precepts he has been presenting are inadequate without grace, Hall makes this point at the very beginning of Heaven upon Earth. He describes the mixture of envy and pity with which he reads Seneca and other "wise heathen, especially those of the Stoicall profession":

I envied nature in them, to see her so witty in devising such

plausible refuges for doubting and troubled minds: I pittied them, to see that their carefull disquisition of true rest, led them in the end but to meere unquietnesse.

"If Seneca could have had grace to his wit," he could have been wiser than any divine; as it was, he went as far as a man could possibly go by the light of nature.

Neither would I ever desire better Master, if to this purpose I needed no other Mistris than Nature. But this in truth is a taske, which Nature hath never without presumption undertaken, and never performed without much imperfection. ... And if she could have truly effected it alone, I know not what employment in this life she should have left for grace to busie her selfe about, nor what privilege it should have been here below to be a Christian, since this that we seek is the noblest worke of the soule, and in which alone consists the only heaven of this world.... Not Athens must teach this lesson, but Jerusalem.⁵²

This "noblest worke of the soule" is the attainment of tranquillity, "an even disposition of the heart" in which it is not elevated or depressed by good or bad fortune but like well-balanced scales "hang[s] equall and unmoved betwixt both."⁵³ The pagan Stoics, Hall declares, have "vainely" sought this tranquillity

either in such a constant estate of outward thinges, as should give no distaste to the minde whiles all earthly things vary with the weather, and have no stay but in uncertaintie, or in the naturall temper of the soule, so ordered by humane wisdom, as that it should not be affected with any casuall events to either part; since that cannot ever by naturall power be held like to it selfe; but one while is cheerefull, stirring and ready to undertake; another while drousie, dull, comfortlesse, prone to rest, weary of it self, loathing his owne purposes, his owne resolutions. In both which since the wisest Philosophers have grounded all the rules of their Tranquillity, it is plaine that they saw it afarre off, as they did heaven it selfe with a desire and admiration, but knew not the way to it: whereupon alas, how slight and impotent are the remedies they prescribe for unquietnesse!⁵⁴

The first point is a mere rhetorical flourish, since the classical Stoics were only too well aware of the mutability and instability of the external

world. The second, however, is a fundamental objection: that the human mind is too changeable ever to achieve constancy and "be held like to it selfe." This is a line of argument which Montaigne develops into a complete philosophy. Hall uses it simply to dismiss the idea of purely natural, Stoic virtue: "the minde of man is too weake to beare out it selfe hereby against all onsets. ... It must be, it can be none but a divine power, that can uphold the mind against the rage of main afflictions...."⁵⁵

Hall, in his blend of Stoic and anti-Stoic attitudes, anticipates Montaigne's treatment of what he calls "a profitable desire; but likewise absurd."⁵⁶ Montaigne, who begins as an orthodox Neostoic and follower of the cult of constancy, is led by a blend of Pyrrhonian scepticism, Christian hostility to Stoic pride, and a sense of man's inherent inconstancy, to doubt whether constancy can be achieved - and whether, if it means "To bee immoveable," it is even a desirable aim. Lipsius and the other Neostoics, as I have argued in this chapter, provide a background to the Roman plays: in their idealisation of the virtue of constancy and its capacity to make human beings divine, and their emphasis on the dangers of opinion and fame which undermine it, they are dealing with the same issues as Shakespeare. It is Montaigne, however, with his deeply sceptical critique of constancy, who provides the most illuminating parallel with Shakespeare's treatment of those issues.

CHAPTER SEVEN

MONTAIGNE AND THE PROFITABLE BUT ABSURD DESIRE

[1] Introduction

Michel de Montaigne (1533-92) began his Essays as an orthodox Neostoic, gradually came to criticise and reject the Stoic ideal, and ended by regarding it with a blend of admiration, repulsion, and ironic criticism. One of his central preoccupations is constancy and inconstancy; another is a sceptical analysis of reason, knowledge, and opinion. It is clear that Montaigne would be a central figure in the intellectual tradition I am tracing, even if we did not know, as we do, that Shakespeare knew and borrowed from the Essays, in the 1603¹ translation by John Florio.

The extent of Shakespeare's knowledge and borrowing, however, is a long-debated question. The connection was first pointed out in 1781, when Capell noted that Gonzalo's account of his utopia in The Tempest is based on a passage in Florio's version of Montaigne's essay "Of the² Caniballes" - a parallel almost universally accepted. In the nineteenth century there were suggestions of a more general influence, and in 1897 John M. Robertson attempted to show, with reference especially to Hamlet and the "problem plays," that Montaigne was the sole important influence

on Shakespeare's intellectual development. Elizabeth Robbins Hooker (1902) and George Coffin Taylor (1925) extended the list of parallels, and Hooker convincingly argued that Shakespeare could have read Florio's translation before 1603, since it was circulated in manuscript, and Shakespeare and Florio, having friends and the patronage of Pembroke in common, must have known one another. Hooker and Taylor saw the influence in more moderate terms than Robertson, Hooker suggesting that Shakespeare used the Essays as "a mere store-house of material" for points of view appropriate to his characters, picking out, for instance, Stoic sentiments on death to assign to his Romans.⁴

In 1942, however, Alice Harmon pointed out that most of the ideas shared by the two writers were commonplaces, derived ultimately from Seneca, Cicero, and Plutarch, and to be found in any number of Renaissance commonplace books, anthologies, and works of popular moral philosophy.⁵ She thus raised fundamental questions about Montaigne's influence on Shakespeare and indeed about the whole question of "influence" among Renaissance writers. The debate remains unresolved; Eleanor Prosser has commented on the "interesting paradox" that "Almost all critics accept Montaigne's influence on Shakespeare as established, yet very few regard the supporting evidence as conclusive. Hundreds of parallels have been offered ... but only one [Capell's] has withstood the attack of sceptics."⁶ Though new parallels are proposed from time to time, there has been no comprehensive modern discussion of the Montaigne-Shakespeare relationship.⁷

I propose in this chapter to focus on one aspect of that relationship: the treatment by Montaigne and Shakespeare of the themes of constancy and inconstancy. While the debate has centered on the question of how far Shakespeare got his knowledge of Stoic ideas from Montaigne, the relevance of Montaigne's later, more original critique of Stoicism has

been largely ignored. Constancy is a leitmotif both of the Essays and of the Roman plays, and Montaigne's final attitude to it - as "a profitable desire; but likewise absurd" in its pride and rigidity and its conflict with the inherent inconstancy of human nature - seems close to Shakespeare's. Since this resemblance is one of outlook rather than specific verbal echoes, it may be a "parallel" rather than an "influence," showing only that Montaigne and Shakespeare responded in similar ways to their reading of Seneca, Cicero, and Plutarch. My argument does not rest upon proving direct indebtedness. Nevertheless, given the evidence that Shakespeare knew the Essays, it seems to me likely that it was Montaigne who focused and shaped his interest in the theme of constancy.

Any discussion of the influence of Montaigne's thought is complicated by the difficulty of defining what Montaigne thought. This is partly a result of the nature of the Essays, which were in a state of continual change and flux over more than twenty years: from the first two Books written in the 1570s and published in 1580, through the major expansion of these essays and the addition of a third Book in 1588, to the further expansions which Montaigne made in the margins of his personal copy, posthumously published in 1595. As a rule Montaigne did not cut or change what he had written, but simply added new passages, so that any essay, or even paragraph, may contain material from different dates expressing quite contradictory views. Montaigne's acceptance of this state of confusion and self-contradiction is characteristic. He was deeply influenced by the sceptical philosophy of Pyrrhonism, and had painted on the ceiling of his library the Pyrrhonic maxim that "to any reason an equal reason can be opposed." R. A. Sayce, quoting this, adds

it is impossible (or at least not easy) to make any statement about him without immediately stating the contrary, to such an extent is his thought ... made up of antitheses, ambiguities,

contradictions of every kind, to such an extent does it endeavour to grasp the full diversity of things.⁸

Inconsistency is part of the very fabric of Montaigne's thought. For this reason any attempt to summarise his philosophy or to plot his intellectual development is bound to be an oversimplification, or (as Sayce warns) a projection of the reader's own ideas.⁹ This is perhaps not the least of his likenesses to Shakespeare.

Nevertheless, it is necessary to try to analyse the development of Montaigne's thought. The most influential analysis was that of Pierre Villey, who saw three stages: an early period of conventional Neostoicism, a sceptical crisis (crise pyrrhonienne) in the mid-1570s when he was converted to Pyrrhonism and lost faith in all his old beliefs, and a final period of la philosophie de la nature, a quasi-Epicurean outlook marked by tolerant and unillusioned acceptance of the world and human nature.¹⁰ Recent critics tend to reject this schematic account.¹¹ Certainly it is oversimplified, ignoring Montaigne's continually changing play of ideas. Nevertheless, I believe Villey's picture of a movement away from Stoicism is essentially accurate, and I shall use his scheme as a framework for my discussion.

In the sections that follow I shall look in turn at Montaigne's early Stoic essays and his cult of constancy; at the awareness of human inconstancy which conflicts with his Stoic beliefs; and at the "sceptical crisis" and rejection of Stoicism in the crucial essay "An Apologie of Raymond Sebonde." The final sections will look at Montaigne's attempts to come to terms with his rejection of Stoicism: the ideal of self-knowledge, the attempt to find a kind of constancy in scepticism and relativism, and the philosophy of acceptance in the late essays.

[2] The Stoic Montaigne

Montaigne began as an orthodox Neostoic. His early essays are short, aphoristic sermons in the Senecan style, and often a mosaic of Senecan quotations. Throughout his career Seneca remained his most quoted author, and it is impossible to isolate a point at which he ceased to be a
¹²Stoic. Even after his death, his contemporaries continued to see him in this light: one eulogist called him "Magnanime Stoïque," another praised
¹³his "philosophie courageuse et presque stoïque."

I have quoted in an earlier chapter Montaigne's explanation of the appeal of Stoicism for himself and his contemporaries: the need, in a time of political chaos, for "strong and vigorous provisions" against the fear
¹⁴of death and ruin. His early essays are preoccupied with the search for such strong provisions. In them, as Frame comments, "life seems to be
¹⁵mostly bad, and its main facts pain and death."

The dominating motif is death, which Montaigne describes as "without
¹⁶all peradventure ... the most remarkable action of humane life." The early Montaigne subscribes wholeheartedly to the Stoic teleological fallacy, that death is the "end" or purpose of life. He quotes with approval the Senecan view that "to live is no such great thing ... but it is a matter of consequence to die honestly, wisely and constantly," and builds an essay around the Senecan passage which describes the moment of
¹⁷death as "the day that judgeth all others."

This view is expressed most fully in I.19, "That to Philosophie [sic], Is to Learne how to Die," which argues, quoting Cicero, that the
¹⁸philosopher's life is a preparation for death. In Seneca's hectoring style, Montaigne insists that death is inevitable and omnipresent, and we can never be happy if we live in fear of it. To ignore it, even if that were possible, would be "brutall stupiditie," "brutish carelessnesse."

Rather we must "learne to stand, and combat her with a resolute minde," using the Stoic technique of constant meditation to familiarise ourselves with the thought of death: "the prem[e]ditation of death, is a forethinking of libertie."¹⁹ This is the technique of outstaring the inevitable practiced by Shakespeare's Brutus:

With meditating that she must die once,
I have the patience to endure it now.²⁰

The essay is a tissue of Stoic quotations and themes, which often set off Shakespearean echoes. Freedom from fear of death sets us free: "He who hath learned to die, hath unlearned to serve." It is folly to fear how and when death will come: "since we are threatened by so many kinds of death, there is no more inconvenience to feare them all, than to endure one: what matter is it when it commeth, since it is unavoidable?" Nature tells us to endure our going hence even as our coming hither: "Depart ... out of this world, even as you came into it. The same way you came from death to life, returne without passion or amazement, from life to death...." We lose nothing by dying early: "no man dies before his houre. The time you leave behinde was no more yours, than that which was before your birth, and concerneth you no more." "It consists not in number of yeeres, but in your will, that you have lived long enough."²¹ Parallels have often been pointed out between such passages as these and some of Shakespeare's "Stoic" passages on death: Cassius on suicide, Caesar on the fear of death, Edgar's "Ripeness is all," Hamlet's "the readiness is all."²² Though all of these ideas, as Harmon pointed out, are Stoic commonplaces, it is not impossible that Shakespeare borrowed them specifically from Montaigne.

To overcome the fear of death and the other afflictions, the Stoic Montaigne relies upon will and reason. Fear of death must be resisted by resolute combat, and the same is true of pain: "A man must oppose and

bandy against it ... Even as the body is more steady and strong to a charge, if it stand stiffely to it, so is the soule." Stoic virtue demands a constant tension of the will in struggle and conflict, "une volonté sans cesse tendue pour l'effort." Mere spontaneous "goodnesse" is inferior to willed philosophical "vertue":

vertue rejecteth facilitie to be her companion.... She requireth a craggie, rough, and thornie way; She would either have strange difficulties to wrestle withall...; or inward encombrances, as the disordinate appetites and imperfections of our condition bring unto her.

Even more important is a rational understanding of moral truth. "That the Taste of Goods or Evils Doth Greatly Depend on the Opinion We Have of Them" (I.40) expounds the Stoic theory of moral knowledge. Our sufferings derive merely from false opinions of what is good or bad; we would not fear death, pain, or the loss of worldly possessions or reputation, if we truly knew how irrelevant these things are to our happiness, but "Opinion is a power-full, bould, and unmeasurable party." The same idea is expressed in I.50: "Therefore let us take no more excuses from externall qualities of things. ... Our good, and our evill, hath no dependancy, but from our selves." In Hamlet's Stoic summing-up, "there is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so." This is familiar Stoic and Neostoic doctrine, but Montaigne seems to push it in the direction of complete relativism and ethical scepticism. The essence of the Stoic theory of moral knowledge is that our false opinions blind us to clear moral truth; Seneca and Cicero would have insisted that virtue, at least, was good in itself. Montaigne, like Hamlet, omits the qualification: "no dependancy," "nothing either good or bad." In this respect one can trace a direct line of development between Montaigne's Stoicism and his later scepticism.

Montaigne's positive Stoic values are summed up in the Neostoic

keyword "constancy," which he defines in a fairly moderate sense in I.12, "Of Constancie." It means, not suicidal defiance of avoidable dangers, but courageous endurance of the inevitable: "the part of constancie is chiefly acted, in firmly bearing the inconveniences, against which no remedie is to be found." Likewise, "the state of the wise Stoicke" is not one of utter indifference to human emotions; like Virgil's Aeneas, he is touched by them, but does not allow them to penetrate and disturb his reason: "Mens immota manet, lachrymæ volvuntur inanes."²⁹ This is the state of mind - rational, self-controlled, courageously enduring - in which Montaigne wishes to face pain and death. He quotes Seneca on the importance of dying "honestly, wisely and constantly," and declares that "my chiefest study is, I may well demeane my selfe at my last gaspe, that is to say, quietly, and constantly."³⁰

Constancy for Montaigne implies not only steadfastness but consistency. He quotes approvingly Seneca's dictum that the essence of virtue is "at all times to will, and not to will one same thing," and declares that to join constancy (consistency) to virtue is the "last perfection"³¹ of the human mind. I shall return to these passages later, however, to show the ironic qualifications with which they are surrounded in their context.

The exemplar of constancy in both senses is Cato of Utica - Montaigne's hero at this period. He describes Cato's constancy as "an harmony of well according tunes ... which cannot contradict it selfe," and defends him as "a patterne, whom nature chose to shew how farre humane vertue may reach, and mans constancie attaine unto."³² In "Of Crueltie" (II.11) he eulogises Cato's glorious death, arguing that he died not merely with Stoic "impassibilitie," but with "a kinde of unspeakable joy of the minde." One might almost think (he adds), if it were not for Cato's famous public-spiritedness, that he welcomed defeat for the chance

to perform such a glorious act, simply for the sake of "the beautie of the thing it selfe in it selfe."³³ No essay more vividly demonstrates the emotional appeal of Stoic heroism to Montaigne. One can also see in the passage, however, hints of his later objections to Stoicism: to its death-wish, and its self-deceiving claim of absolute rationality.

Villey, pointing to the impersonal and derivative character of the early essays, maintained that Montaigne's early Stoicism was never much more than a bookish pose and "affaire de mode," appealing to his imagination rather than his reason or deeper convictions.³⁴ Modern critics tend to place more emphasis on the influence of Stoicism throughout Montaigne's career, and this, I believe, is an important corrective.³⁵ The appeal of Stoicism to Montaigne may have been, as Villey suggests, largely imaginative, but such passages as the account of Cato's death reveal the strength of his emotional attraction to "the beautie of the thing it selfe in it selfe" and the Stoic vision of human heroism. Moreover, the motives which drove him to Stoicism - the pressure of death, pain, and sorrow, the quest for self-reliance - are very real, and remain real throughout the Essays. His early Stoic philosophy of renunciation, and his later philosophy of acceptance, are equally genuine ways of dealing with the sense of a world in flux.

[3] A diverse and wavering subject: Montaigne and inconstancy

Even in the earliest essays, Montaigne's Stoicism is counterbalanced by a powerful sense of the inconstancy and mutability of the world, and in particular of human nature.

This theme is stressed, with the effect of sounding a keynote, at the

beginning, middle, and end of the original two-Book Essays. The very first essay, "By Divers Meanes Men Come unto a Like End," declares

Surely, man is a wonderfull, vaine, divers, and wavering subject: it is very hard to ground any directly-constant and uniforme judgement upon him.³⁷

The theme is developed at length in II.1, "Of the Inconstancie of Our Actions" (c. 1572-4):

There is nothing I so hardly beleeeve to be in man, as constancie, and nothing so easie to be found in him, as inconstancy.

What we even now purposed, we alter by and by, and presently returne to our former biase: all is but changing, motion, and inconstancy.... We goe not, but we are carried: as things that flote, now gliding gently, now hulling violently; according as the water is, either stormy or calme. ... We float and waver betweene divers opinions: we will nothing freely, nothing absolutely, nothing constantly.

We are all framed of flaps and patches and of so shapelesse and diverse a contexture, that every peece and every moment playeth his part. And there is as much difference found betweene us and our selves, as there is betweene our selves and other.³⁸

And the last words of the last essay of Book II underline the point:

"Diversity is the most universall quality."

Montaigne repeatedly stresses the inconsistency, unpredictability, and inexplicability of human behaviour, and criticises those who seek to simplify it into a neat pattern. The theme of I.1 is that the same action can lead on different occasions to directly opposite results. Montaigne wryly points out the flaw in his own method: collecting historical exempla in order to generalise about human behaviour, he finds that its most predictable quality is unpredictability. "Of the Inconstancie of Our Actions" (II.1) criticises historians who attempt to force their subjects' actions into a consistent pattern:

seeing the naturall instability of our customes and opinions; I have often thought, that even good Authors, doe ill, and take a wrong course, wilfully to opinionate themselves about framing a constant and solide contexture of us. They chuse an universall ayre, and following that image, range and interpret all a mans actions; which if they cannot wrest sufficiently, they remit them into dissimulation.⁴⁰

Such over-tidy explanations ignore our essential inconsistency. We are all a patchwork of contradictory qualities. We change character from moment to moment, swayed by the most casual impulses:

He whom you saw yesterday so boldly-venturous, wonder not if you see him a dastardly meacocke to morrow next: for either anger or necessitie, company or wine, a sudden fury or the clang of a trumpet, might rowze-up his heart, and stir up his courage.⁴¹

Nor is it possible with any certainty to infer motives from actions. Virtuous behaviour may proceed from vicious motives: ambition can make men act bravely and generously, lust can spur them on to acts of heroic self-denial. Montaigne concludes that, before we can pronounce upon human character, we need a far more subtle science of psychology, and this must be based in the first place upon self-knowledge:

It is no part of a well grounded judgement, simply to judge our selves by our exterior actions: A man must thorowly sound himselfe, and dive into his heart, and there see by what wards or springs the motions stirre.⁴²

Montaigne develops the point in "How We Weepe and Laugh at One Selfe-same Thing" (I.37), where he criticises historians who "remit ... into dissimulation" the grief of men at their enemies' deaths. We must recognise the complexity of human emotions: "our mindes are often agitated by divers passions," and although one may be predominant, "it is not with so full an advantage, but for the volubilitie and supplenesse of our minde, the weakest may by occasion reobtaine the place againe, and when

their turne commeth, make a new charge...." So we can weep and laugh almost simultaneously at the same thing, and it is quite possible "to mourne for him dead, whom a man by no meanes would have alive againe."⁴³ Shakespeare develops the same insight, and uses the same image, in Antony's reaction to the death of Fulvia:

Thus did I desire it.
 What our contempts doth often hurl from us
 We wish it ours again; the present pleasure,
 By revolution lowering, does become
 The opposite of itself. She's good, being gone....⁴⁴

Of course, Shakespeare's source is Plutarch's Lives, which Montaigne also loved for their psychological insight; the two writers may simply be responding in the same ways to Plutarch's pictures of human behaviour.⁴⁵ I believe, though, that here and elsewhere Shakespeare is reading Plutarch through Montaigne's eyes, and that his picture of the "volubilitie and suppleness," complexity and ambivalence of human emotions in Antony and Cleopatra is a direct response to Montaigne's treatment of the theme.

Montaigne's sense of inconstancy would not necessarily bring him into conflict with Stoicism. The mutability of the world and the irrationality of human passions are traditional Stoic themes. They normally lead, in Stoic writing, to a renewed insistence on the necessity for constancy: the stability of the rational mind, self-consistent and unmoved by passion or the world's changes. Montaigne, however, goes further. He sees inconstancy as a fundamental fact of life which makes Stoic constancy impossible to achieve, and perhaps even undesirable.

In "Of the Inconstancie of Our Actions" Montaigne sets his vision of universal flux and inconstancy, of human beings floating back and forth "lackeying the varying tide," against the Stoic ideal of constancy epitomised in Cato.⁴⁶ Montaigne approves this moral ideal, yet he stresses how ambitious it is and how rarely achieved:

View all antiquity over, and you shall finde it a hard matter, to chuse out a dozen of men, that have directed their life unto one certaine, settled, and assured course; which is the surest drift of wisdom. For, to comprehend all in one word, saith an ancient Writer [sc. Seneca], and to embrace all the rules of our life into one, it is at all times to will, and not to will one same thing.⁴⁷

To be genuine, such constancy must show itself under all circumstances and in every action, great or small, and therefore "to judge a man, we must a long time follow, and very curiously marke his steps; whether constancie doe wholly subsist and continue upon her owne foundation in him...." It depends upon an ability (to adapt Arnold's phrase) to see one's life steadily and see it whole.

It is impossible for him to dispose of his particular actions, that hath not in grose directed his life unto one certaine end. It is impossible for him to range all peeces in order, that hath not a plot or forme of the totall frame in his head.

But, Montaigne immediately adds,

No man makes any certaine designe of his life, and we deliberate of it but by parcels.⁴⁸

This could be taken merely as a complaint that we usually fail to live up to the ideal of constancy. In the context of the essay as a whole, however, it looks more like a fundamental objection to the ideal: that it depends upon a perfect rationality and a perfectly integrated view of life which, given the fragmented nature of our existence and the fact that we are all "framed of flaps and patches," is inherently impossible.

Montaigne sums up, somewhat equivocally, by quoting Seneca: "Esteeme it a great matter, to play but one man."⁴⁹ It is indeed "a great matter," but is it too great for us ever to achieve it?

In the next essay, "Of Drunkennesse" (II.2) - another early essay, also written around 1572 - Montaigne, while apparently improvising

randomly around the theme of drunkenness, directs two even more searching criticisms at the Stoic ideal. The first arises out of the "old and pleasant question, whether a wisemans mind were like to yeeld unto the force of wine." Montaigne mocks this question for the "vanity" implied in its confidence in the power of the mind.

Of a thousand there is not one perfectly righteous and settled but one instant of her life, and question might be made, whether according to her naturall condition she might at any time be so. But to joyne constancie unto it [is] her last perfection: I meane if nothing should shocke her: which a thousand accidents may doe.⁵⁰

Drunkenness is only one example of the involuntary forces which can "shocke" our reason. Lucretius was driven insane by a drug; Socrates himself could have been reduced to childishness by a stroke; the wisest philosopher cannot help but flinch if you swing a blow at him. Our vaunted immovable, impregnable minds are enclosed in flesh and at the mercy of physical forces, of humours, hormones, reflexes -

Nature having purposed to reserve these light markes of her authoritie unto herself, inexpugnable unto our reason, and to the Stoicke vertue: to teach him his mortalitie, and our insipiditie.⁵¹

The point is an Augustinian one, and Shakespeare in turn makes it in Julius Caesar by his stress on the characters' physical frailties:

Caesar's epilepsy, fever, and deafness, Ligarius' ague, Brutus' insomnia, Cassius' near-sightedness, Portia's faintness. The more they seek to rise above the body, the more Nature reminds them of its power: Caesar can be reduced by fever to crying like "a sick girl," and, though immovable as Olympus,⁵² can be felled by a dagger in the neck.

This insistence on the power of the body anticipates much of Montaigne's later critique of Stoicism. Here, however, it is only a preparation for the second and more fundamental criticism: that the virtue

of the Stoic hero is in itself a kind of drunkenness or madness. Moral doctrines which attempt to exempt the wise man entirely from human weakness or emotion are unnatural and dangerous, and based upon self-deception. When we see (for example) Lucius Brutus putting his sons to death, we must wonder, with Plutarch, if he was not in fact "moved by some other passion," pride, anger, or cruelty; "All actions beyond the ordinarie limits, are subject to some sinister interpretation...." Or when we read of Stoic martyrs boasting of their indifference to pain upon the rack or in the flames, "Verely wee must needs confesse there is some alteration, and some furie (how holy soever) in those mindes." Such "constancy" must arise from a kind of madness, akin to poetic or prophetic fury.

Our minde cannot out of her place [i.e. while remaining in her normal place] attaine so high. She must quit it and raise her selfe aloft, and taking the bridle in her teeth, carry and transport her man so farre, that afterward hee wonder at himselfe, and rest amazed at his actions.

And Aristotle was right

to call any starting or extraordinarie conceit (how commendable soever) and which exceedeth our judgement and discourse, folly. Forsomuch as wisdome, is an orderly and regular managing of the minde, and which she addresseth with measure, and conducteth with proportion....⁵³

Montaigne suggests a startling paradox: Stoic wisdom is folly. True wisdom consists in order, balance, and regularity, whereas the inordinate virtue of the Stoic hero can only be shown in bursts and transports of heroic insanity. To be wholly unperturbed and unaffected by external things, wholly detached from the body, is not a normal state but a kind of madness. We may achieve it for brief heroic moments, but we cannot be like that constantly. Stoic constancy, in other words, cannot be constantly (consistently) practiced.

Montaigne is, I believe, the first writer in the tradition I have been tracing to suggest that there is an inherent contradiction between the two senses of "constancy": heroic steadfastness, and consistency. His criticisms of the constancy ideal in these early essays - for its self-contradictoriness and its neglect of the realities of the human mind and body - prepare for his more comprehensive attack on Stoicism in the "Apologie of Raymond Sebond," an attack which largely focuses on the idea of inconstancy.

[4] The "Apologie" and the repudiation of Stoicism

According to Villey, in the year 1575-76 Montaigne underwent a "crise⁵⁵ pyrrhonienne," a sudden and traumatic conversion to radical scepticism. More recent critics have questioned whether the conversion was so sudden, complete, or traumatic as Villey thought, pointing out that scepticism is present in Montaigne's thought from the beginning; indeed, as I have⁵⁶ already noted, he stresses the sceptical element in Stoicism itself. Nevertheless, I think Villey is right in seeing a turning-point in 1576, after which scepticism comes to dominate Montaigne's thought. It is under the influence of this new sceptical epistemology that he comes to reject Neostoicism, with its dogmatic certainty and its faith in the power of human will and reason.

The immediate source of Montaigne's new scepticism was Sextus Empiricus' handbook of Pyrrhonism, a sceptical philosophy of the first century AD which traces its origins to the semi-legendary doubter⁵⁷ Pyrrho. Its central tenet is that we can have no certain knowledge which goes beyond appearances (that is, such statements as "This snow appears white to me"). The Pyrrhonians thus oppose all dogmatic

philosophies which claim knowledge of absolute truth; the Platonic-Stoic distinction between knowledge and opinion is illusory, since all is opinion. They also, however, reject Cicero's brand of Academic scepticism as insufficiently sceptical: whereas the Academic starts from the Socratic premise that "all I know is that I know nothing," the Pyrrhonian prefers Montaigne's tentative formula "What do I know?" They reject the Academic concept of probability: since everything is uncertain, any proposition is as probable as any other, and "to any reason an equal reason can be opposed." The Pyrrhonian ideal, therefore, is complete suspension of judgement, refusing to affirm or deny any proposition. Of course, even complete sceptics must make certain assumptions in order to live, and so, in Montaigne's words, they will "suffer their common actions to be directed" by "natural inclinations" and the laws and customs of their society, but "without any conceit or judgement" about the truth of these assumptions.⁵⁸

To these classical doctrines Montaigne, as a Christian sceptic or fideist, adds the qualification that there is one form of knowledge to which we can give absolute belief: that derived from divine revelation. Paradoxically, the only things we can believe with certainty are those for which our reason and our senses give us no evidence.⁵⁹

Pyrrhonism has an obvious appeal to Montaigne's mind, so sensitive to ambiguity and diversity and fond of seeing and arguing both sides of a question. In this (as I have already suggested) he resembles Shakespeare. Whether or not direct influence is involved, we can see something very similar to Montaigne's sceptical spirit in Shakespeare's "problem plays," in a debate-comedy such as As You Like It, in the unresolved ambiguities of Hamlet, and (most relevantly to my purpose) in the Roman plays. The clash of opposing critical interpretations of these plays reflects the opposed and irreconcilable views we are given of Caesar, of Coriolanus,

and of Antony and Cleopatra, as if Shakespeare were illustrating the Pyrrhonian principle that "to any reason an equal reason can be opposed."

Montaigne's fullest exposition of Pyrrhonism is the "Apologie of Raymond Sebond" (II.12), the longest by far of the essays (it occupies two hundred pages in the Everyman edition). It was written in response to a request by a Catholic patroness to defend the Natural Theology of the twelfth-century Spanish theologian Raymond Sebond against its Protestant critics.⁶⁰ The result was a back-handed defence which, as a French critic⁶¹ has remarked, supports Sebond as the rope supports the hanged man. Montaigne defends Sebond's rationalistic arguments for Christianity against their rationalistic critics by a thorough-going assault on human reason, demonstrating its impotence not only to refute Sebond but to know or prove anything whatsoever.

The attack on human reason in the "Apologie" has two sides, which are, however, inseparably interwoven. The first is an exposition of Pyrrhonian scepticism, demonstrating that we do not know, and cannot possibly know, anything for certain about the nature of reality and the universe. The second is a destructive critique of the human mind, its weakness, ignorance, fallibility, and most of all its vanity and presumption in claiming (in spite of these defects) to know and judge the universe. Montaigne describes the purpose of his argument as

to crush, and trample this humane pride and fiercenesse under foot, to make them feeble the emptinesse, vacuitie, and no worth of man: and violently to pull out of their hands, the silly weapons of their reason; to make them stoope, and bite and snarle at the ground, under the authority and reverence of Gods Majesty.⁶²

"They," the opponents Montaigne proposes to humble, are ostensibly the Protestant critics of Sebond's theology. In the course of the argument, however, it becomes clear that, as Donald Frame has argued, the real target of Montaigne's attack is the Stoics, and their faith in the

perfectibility of man through reason.

The argument of the "Apologie" is complex, prolix, and often disorganised.⁶³ I shall look in detail only at its final section, in which Montaigne uses a demonstration of the inconstancy of the world and of man to support his most radically sceptical assertion: that we cannot possibly know reality.

The essence of his argument is that we are creatures of flux, and our perceptions and judgements are continually shifting, so that we cannot rely upon them as any guide to truth. Human opinions, like human character, are both "divers" and "wavering." The diversity of opinions, the fact "that no proposition is seene, which is not controversied and debated amongst us, or that may not be, declareth plainly, that our judgment doth not absolutly and clearly seize on that which it seizeth" - as Stoic epistemology would have it. Nor do we even agree with ourselves, for each individual's opinions are continually changing:

What I hold and beleeeve this day, I beleeeve and hold with all my beleefe: all my implements, springs and motions, embrace and claspe this opinion, and to the utmost of their power warrant the same: I could not possibly embrace any verity, nor with more assurance keepe it, then I do this. I am wholly and absolutely given to it: but hath it not beene my fortune, not once, but a hundred, nay a thousand times, [nay] daily, to have embraced some other thing, with the very same instruments and condition, which upon better advise I have afterward judged false?⁶⁴

It is no wonder that our opinions change. In the first place (as Montaigne pointed out in "Of Drunkenesse"), "our apprehension, our judgement, and our soules faculties in generall, doe suffer according to the bodies motions and alterations, which are continuall"; the mind is at the mercy of the body's health and sickness, or the purely chemical changes produced by drink or drugs.⁶⁵ Even more, it is at the mercy of its own emotions. We may delude ourselves that we are rational beings, but in fact we are motivated almost entirely by passions, without whose

impetus the soul would "remain without action, as a ship at Sea, which the winds have utterly forsaken." So little influence does rational conviction have on our motives that many men have, under the stress of anger, obstinacy, or the desire for glory, gone to the stake for opinions which in calm discussion they would scarcely have defended.⁶⁶

If our personal opinions are inconstant and irrational, so too are the accepted opinions of mankind - laws, customs, and creeds. They are similarly diverse and changeable with time; and

if Nature enclose within the limits of her ordinary progresse, as all other things, so the beliefes, the judgments and the opinions of men; if they have their revolutions, their seasons, their birth, and their death, even as Cabiches [=cabbages]: If heaven doth move, agitate and rowle them at his pleasure, what powerfull and permanent authority doe we ascribe unto them?⁶⁷

It is sensible, as Socrates commanded, to obey the customs and laws of one's own society; but what does this command imply, except "that our devoire or duety hath no other rule, but casuall?" Customs and laws are merely arbitrary, with no "permanent authority." "Truth ought to have a like and universall visage throughout the world" - but there is nothing universal in human beliefs except diversity. There is no custom so silly or so horrible that some society has not prescribed it as a moral or legal duty.

It is credible that there be naturall lawes; as may be seene in other creatures, but in us they are lost: this goodly humane reason engrafting it selfe among all men, to sway and command, confounding and topsi-turving the visage of all things, according to her inconstant vanitie and vaine inconstancy.⁶⁸

Casually Montaigne kicks aside the Stoic distinction between reason and opinion: "this goodly humane reason" (as he sarcastically terms it) is in fact nothing more than our old friend, vain and inconstant opinion.

He proceeds to call into question our senses, which are our only

medium for gathering information about the world. Our thoughts, emotions and beliefs are controlled by our sense-impressions. Yet our senses often conflict with one another; one man's perceptions differ from another's; our perceptions differ (apparently) from those of the animals - if the senses are our only road to knowledge, how can we possibly decide between such conflicting pieces of evidence?

Montaigne concludes in a way that seems to anticipate the "uncertainty principle" of twentieth-century physics: both we the observers, and the external world we perceive, are in constant movement and flux, there is no way to step outside the dance to see clearly, and so knowledge of truth is impossible. Flux cannot know flux.

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In few, there is no constant existence, neither of our being, nor of the objects. And we, and our judgement, and all mortall things else do uncessantly rowle, turne, and passe away. Thus can nothing be certainly established, nor of the one, nor of the other; both the judgeing and the judged being in continuall alteration and motion. We have no communication with being; for every humane nature is ever in the middle between being borne and dying; giving nothing of it selfe but an obscure apparence and shadow, and an uncertaine and weake opinion. And if perhaps you fix your thought to take its being; it would be even, as if one should go about to grasp the water....

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The only Being in the universe who is exempted from this universal flux, who is unchanging, constant, and stable, is God. For peroration, therefore, Montaigne paraphrases a passage of Plutarch in praise of the eternal and timeless nature of God: "only God is, not according to any measure of time, but according to an immoveable and immutable eternity." To find truth and constancy we must turn to Christian faith.

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Instead of concluding on this note, however, Montaigne turns unexpectedly to quote Seneca: "Oh what a vile and abject thing is man ... unlesse he raise himselfe above humanity!" The "Apologie" concludes with his comments on this saying:

Observe here a notable speech, and a profitable desire; but likewise absurd. For to make the handfull greater then the hand, and the embraced greater then the arme; and to hope to straddle more then our legs length; is impossible and monstrous: nor that man should mount over and above himselfe or humanity; for, he cannot see but with his owne eyes, nor take hold but with his owne armes. He shall raise himselfe up, if it please God extraordinarily to lend him his helping hand. He may elevate himselfe by forsaking and renouncing his owne meanes, and suffering himselfe to be elevated and raised by meere heavenly meanes. It is for our Christian faith, not for his Stoicke vertue to pretend or aspire to this divine Metamorphosis, or miraculous transmutation.⁷²

Montaigne's massive argument thus comes round in the end to bear upon Seneca and the Stoic hero, and, as Frame says, "his conclusion is not an affirmation of Pyrrhonism but a repudiation of Stoicism."⁷³ The conclusion is likely to seem a non sequitur unless we realise, as Frame argues, that the real target of the "Apologie" is Stoicism. The Stoic ethic is based upon belief in the accessibility of truth, and the ability of human beings, by unaided human reason and will, to attain a state of godlike stability and perfection. In response Montaigne insists upon the weakness and inconstancy of human reason, its vulnerability to the body and the emotions, its inability to perceive truth, its submersion in a sea of flux utterly alien to the stable constancy of God. We can only achieve perfection by divine grace.

Montaigne's divided feelings in thus rejecting his former beliefs are summed up in the brief sentence in which he passes judgement on Seneca's dictum. It is "a notable speech" (memorable, impressive, worth pondering), and it expresses "a profitable desire," for who would not wish that man could rise above the wretchedly limited condition described in the "Apologie"? Nevertheless it is "absurd," because it is inherently impossible. This sentence was added by Montaigne in his final revisions of the Essays, and the complexity of its judgement suggests the complexity of Montaigne's final attitude to Stoicism: admiration of its aims, coupled with a sense that it overrates the power of human will and reason, and

presumptuously claims to produce effects that simply cannot be achieved by unaided human effort.

If Shakespeare read the "Apologie" (which seems highly probable, but not provable) he would have found in it a critique of Stoicism, traditional in its essentials, but expressed with a subtlety and ambivalence which foreshadows his own implied judgement of his Roman characters. He would also have found here the definitive expression of a scepticism which a number of critics have found reflected in the plays, Julius Caesar especially. The world of the Roman plays, where "men may construe things after their fashion, / Clean from the purpose of the things themselves," where the most patient observation may lead to disastrously incomplete or incorrect perceptions and deductions, where men profess to act by reason alone but in fact are swayed by unacknowledged passions and bodily weaknesses, where they are governed by arbitrary laws and customs which they take for immutable truths, and where they claim marble constancy in the midst of a world in flux - this world, though it may owe much to the scepticism of Cicero, is pre-eminently the world of Montaigne's "Apologie."⁷⁴

[5] Self-knowledge and sceptical constancy

Montaigne's rejection of Senecan Stoic constancy does not mean that he ceases to want some kind of stability amid the world's flux. He seeks to find it, in the essays written shortly after the "Apologie," in an ideal of self-knowledge and of being consistently true to oneself. This ideal is very similar to Cicero's decorum. The similarity is qualified, however, by Montaigne's hostility to Cicero and his public and external concept of virtue, and by the fact that Montaigne's kind of consistency is

based not upon Stoic reason but upon scepticism and arbitrary choice.

After his debunking of human reason in the "Apologie," the only kind of knowledge in which Montaigne sees any possibility of certainty is self-knowledge. In his later essays he attempts to carry out the project proposed in "Of the Inconstancie of Our Actions": "A man must thorowly sound himselfe, and dive into his heart, and there see by what wards or springs the motions stirre." ⁷⁵ At the same time, he is very aware of the difficulty of accurate self-knowledge in a world of inconstancy and flux.

These aims and difficulties are summed up in the opening paragraphs of "Of Repenting" (III.2, written c. 1586?), which begins with Montaigne's most famous evocation of the inconstancy of all things:

The world runnes all on wheeles. All things therein moove without intermission; yea the earth, the rockes of Caucasus, and the Pyramides of Ægypt, both with the publike and their own motion. Constancy it selfe is nothing but a languishing and wavering dance.

The idea is similar to Lipsius' lament over the mutability of all things, but Montaigne's words are touched with humour and even a kind of exhilaration. In the midst of this universal flux, Montaigne attempts to observe himself, though the experiment is made difficult by the fact that both observer and subject are continually changing:

I cannot settle my object; it goeth so unquietly and staggering, with a naturall drunkennesse. I take it in this plight, as it is at th' instant I amuse my selfe about it. I describe not the essence, but the passage; not a passage from age to age, or as the people reckon, from seaven yeares to seaven, but from day to day, from minute to minute. ... I may soone change, not onely fortune, but intention. It is a counter-roule of divers and variable accidents, and irresolute imaginations, and sometimes contrary: whether it be that my selfe am other, or that I apprehend subjects, by other circumstances and considerations. Howsoever, I may perhaps gaine-say my selfe, but truth (as Demades said) I never gaine-say: ⁷⁶ Were my mind settled, I would not essay, but resolve my selfe.

Montaigne denies that such a self-portrait is merely a trivial exercise in vanity. "Every man beareth the whole stamp of humane condition," and so, by studying himself as a representative human being, he is studying the entire "humane condition."⁷⁷ His stress on his own inconstancy and changeableness, his inclusion of trivial and undignified details, and his frank descriptions of bodily functions, are part of a protest against the oversimplified, idealised, bodiless lay figure which Stoic and other philosophers have set up to represent Man.

The central idea of these essays is "Know thyself." This ancient maxim has two traditional interpretations, depending on whether it is related (to use Cicero's terminology) to one's persona as a member of the human race or as an individual. In the first sense, the phrase is essentially a warning against hubris; it means "Know you are a human being, recognise your human limitations." In the second sense, it means "Know yourself as an individual, be guided by a true knowledge of your own qualities, virtues and faults." Montaigne's ideal of self-knowledge embraces both senses. At the same time, he is aware that the Delphic command to "know your selves" is "a paradoxical commandment," for there is nothing we are less inclined to do.⁷⁸ We are cut off from self-knowledge in the first sense by "vanity," an unrealistically lofty notion of human nature and its capacities; in the second sense, by a preoccupation with role-playing and the opinions of others.

On the first ground Montaigne criticises philosophers, and especially the Stoics, for the faults attacked in "Of Presumption" (II.17) and "Of Vanity" (III.9). Circling in the latter essay around the Biblical text that "all is vanity" (Ecclesiastes 12:9), Montaigne unexpectedly turns to attack, not the vanity of our everyday lives (which is inevitable and inescapable), but the philosophers who, in condemning it and seeking to rise above it, set impossibly high standards for us to attain. This is

true "vanity" in both senses of the word, both arrogance and futility.

Life is a materiall and corporall motion, an action imperfect and disordered by its owne essence:.... To what purpose are these heaven-looking and nice points of Philosophie, on which no humane being can establish and ground it selfe? And to what end serve these rules, that exceed our use and excell our strength?

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Wee are farre enough from being honest according to God: For, wee cannot be such according to our selves. Humane wisdom could never reach the duties ... it had prescribed unto it selfe. And had it at any time attained them, then would it doubtlesse prescribe some others beyond them, to which it might ever aspire and pretend.⁷⁹ So great an enemy is our condition unto consistence.

Parts of this passage seem to be echoed by Shakespeare. Immediately after the condemnation of "rules, that ... excell our strength" come vignettes of a judge scribbling a note to his mistress on a scrap torn from the sheet on which he wrote an adulterer's sentence, of an adulterous wife who rails against fornication in the tones of Portia or Lucrece, and of those who "condemne men to die for crimes, that themselves esteeme no faults." This is unmistakably similar to some of Lear's mad speeches, and the adulterous judge could be a sketch for Angelo in Measure for Measure.⁸⁰ A little later there comes the comment that "No man is so exquisitely honest or upright in living ... that ten times in his life might not lawfully be hanged" - echoed by Hamlet's "Use every man after his desert, and who shall scape whipping?"⁸¹ It seems as if Shakespeare was deeply struck by this section of Montaigne's essay, whose central point is the ironic contrast between our inherently sinful nature and our impossible pretensions to virtue.

In his final additions Montaigne adds to this passage a quotation from De officiis on the necessity for following both universal Nature and one's own nature.⁸² He means, I think, to recall the point Cicero makes a few lines later: that it is pointless to pursue a role, however noble, for which one is not suited. This, Montaigne implies, is as true for mankind

in general as for individuals. It is philosophers such as the Stoics, with their insistence that man must "raise himselfe above humanity," who drive us to such absurd and wicked hypocrisies in our attempts to pretend to be better than we are, and to play a role in which we are hopelessly "o'erparted."⁸³

Montaigne, in fact, sees Stoicism in general as tainted by its concern with public role-playing. His test case is the story of the Stoic philosopher Posidonius, who insisted on continuing to lecture during the throes of a painful illness, declaring, "Paine, doe what thou list, I shall never be drawne to say, that thou art an evil." Even in an early Stoic essay Montaigne objected, "This saying, which they would make of such consequence, what doth it inferre against the contempt of paine? it contends but for the word."⁸⁴ Now he extends the criticism:

...I have ever found that precept ceremonious, which so precizely appoints a man to set a good countenance, a settled resolution, and disdainfull carriage, upon the sufferance of evils. Why doth Philosophy, which onely respecteth liveliness and regardeth effects, ammuze itself about these externall appearances? Let her leave this care to Mimikes, to Histrions, and to Rhetorike Masters, who make so great accompt of our gestures.⁸⁵

He is similarly impatient with the Stoic ideal of a deathbed exhibition of constancy. He no longer desires "to make either triall or shew of my constancy" in dying, but only to have a quiet and private death, for "then shall the right and interest I have in reputation cease"; and he praises those ancient Romans like Petronius who died in a casual and comfortable way, with no ceremonies or sermons or "ambitious affectation of constancie."⁸⁶ Why should self-reliant virtue be so concerned about how others perceive it?

Montaigne sees the same concern for role-playing and public opinion as responsible for our lack of self-knowledge in the second sense, as individuals. This, of course, is a traditional Neostoic idea. "In going

about to frame apparances according to the common opinion, wee defraud our selves of our owne profits. Wee care not so much, what our state, or how our being is in us, and in effect, as wee doe how and what it is, in the publike knowledge of others." In "Of Repenting" he recommends judging by one's own consistent "touch-stone":

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Such as we especially, who live a private life not exposed to any gaze but our owne, ought in our hearts establish a touch-stone, and there to touch our deedes and try our actions.... None but your self knows rightly whether you be demiss and cruel, or loyal and devout. Others see you not, but ghesse you by uncertaine conjectures. They see not so much your nature as your arte. Adhere not then to their opinion, but hold unto your owne.

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Every one may play the jugler, and represent an honest man upon the stage; but within, and in bosome, where all things are lawfull, where all is concealed; to keepe a due rule or formall decorum, that's the point.

The phrase "formall decorum" naturally recalls Cicero's decorum (as well as Brutus's "formal constancy"); and although it originates with Florio, not with Montaigne, it is accurate in suggesting the similarity of Montaigne's and Cicero's concepts of consistent selfhood based upon self-knowledge.

There are, however, significant differences. Montaigne has a far greater sense than Cicero of the complexity and mysteriousness of human personality. He insists that we can never know what is going on inside another person's mind; we can only "ghesse ... by uncertaine conjectures," and our judgements may be entirely beside the point. This is a sense which Shakespeare shares with Montaigne, and one which is especially prominent in Julius Caesar. The Romans in that play, though entirely bound up in public life and public judgements, are perpetually attempting to "ghesse" one another's private thoughts and motives: what is Caesar really like, is Cassius dangerous or harmless, is Casca's apparent dullness his "nature" or his "arte"? In some cases we suspect that the

characters themselves, in their anxiety to "frame apparences according to the common opinion," are hardly aware of their own motives.

More fundamentally, whereas Cicero stresses the playing of an appropriate role, Montaigne sees a fundamental dichotomy between person and role, "apparence" and "essence." This idea is expressed in a passage which might well have caught Shakespeare's eye, for it quotes a version of the Latin tag which was the motto of the Globe theatre:

Mundus universus exercet histrioniam. All the world doth practise stage-playing. Wee must play our parts duly, but as the part of a borrowed personage. Of a visard and apparence, wee should not make a real essence, nor proper of that which is another. Wee cannot distinguish the skinne from the shirt. It is sufficient to disguise the face, without deforming the breast. I see some transforme and transubstantiate themselves, into as many new formes and strange beings, as they undertake charges: and who emprelate themselves even to the heart and entrailles; and entraine their offices even sitting on their close stoole.⁸⁹

All role-playing, for Montaigne, is to some extent a betrayal of the integrity of the personality. Above all one must not allow one's personal identity to be swallowed up in one's role - as, arguably, happens to Caesar or Coriolanus, or indeed Richard II.

This difference in outlook may partly explain Montaigne's distaste for Cicero as a writer and a man, and his reluctance to acknowledge the debt of his ideas to Cicero's, though he quotes him with increasing frequency in Book III.⁹⁰ Jeffrey M. Green, in a perceptive article, argues that Montaigne's basic objection is to the externality of Cicero's concept of virtue:

Cicero seems not completely to grasp the difference between speaking and doing; Montaigne was always acutely aware of it. Cicero treats virtues as important as patriotism and firmness in the face of death as parts of a public performance. For Montaigne, they could not be performed before an audience; they had to be demonstrated in action, when an occasion called for them.⁹¹

For Montaigne, Cicero's ideal of self-knowledge and consistent selfhood is hopelessly bound up with concern for public roles and appearances.

Montaigne is anxious to dissociate himself from what he sees as a shabby and second-rate version of his own ideal. It is only in his final revisions of the Essays that, by inserting some quotations from De officiis I, he partially acknowledges his debt to Cicero.⁹²

The ideal of self-knowledge is fundamental to all Montaigne's later essays. In some of the essays of Book II he develops an ideal which seems particularly close to Cicero's decorum: of being consistently oneself in all one's words and actions. Montaigne's self-consistency, however, is divorced from the Stoic idea of homologia with right reason which underlies Cicero's decorum. Instead, it is explicitly based upon scepticism and arbitrary, irrational choice. Montaigne recommends being true to one's own character because it is one's own, and there is no rational reason for judging that any other course would be better. In Coriolanus' words, he will follow "mine own truth" - not because it is "truth" but because it is "mine own."⁹³

The idea of a constancy which arises out of scepticism first appears in the "Apologie":

Now by the knowledge of my volubilitie, I have by accident
engendred some constancy of opinions in my selfe; yea have not so
much altered my first and naturall ones. For, what apparence
soever there be in novelty, I do not easily change, for feare I
should lose by the bargaine: And since I am not capable to chuse,
I take the choise from others; and keepe my selfe in the seate,
that God hath placed me in. Else could I hardly keepe my selfe
from continuall rowling.⁹⁴

In its context this is a plea for constant allegiance to Catholic orthodoxy. The idea can, however, be given a more relativistic slant, to suggest that we should stick to our own opinions because they are our own. In "Of Presumption" (II.17, written c. 1578-80), Montaigne, analysing his

own character, admits that his besetting fault is indecisiveness: "I cannot resolve in matters admitting doubtfulness." He is easily swayed by the last argument he has heard or by the opinion of the crowd, and is always conscious of the "slippery" foundations on which his opinions rest; "yet" (he adds) "am I not very easie to change, forsomuch as I perceive a like weaknesse in contrary opinions." ⁹⁵ Scepticism can serve as a bulwark for stability of opinion: if it shows you the doubtfulness of your own convictions, it also shows the doubtfulness of other points of view - and why exchange one uncertainty for another? Whatever his faults, he declares, he can at least claim the virtue of self-knowledge.

This capacitie of sifting out the truth, what, and howsoever it be in me, and this free humour I have, not very easily to subject my beliefe, I owe especially unto my selfe, for the most constant, and generall imaginations I have are those, which (as one would say) were borne with me: They are natural unto me, and wholly mine.

These opinions have been strengthened "by the authoritie of others, and by the sound examples of ancients"; but the essential fact about them is that they are his own. That is why he has remained consistent in them, and, if he cannot lay claim to mental brilliance, can at least claim the merit of consistency - "the order, correspondencie, and tranquillitie of opinions and customes."

In his final revisions, Montaigne here inserts a quotation from De officiis; Cicero's statement that the essence of decorum is consistency (aequabilitas) in all one's words and actions, a consistency which can ⁹⁶ only be achieved by being oneself. Montaigne thus by implication accepts Cicero's decorum. His originality lies in the sceptical and relativistic turn he gives the concept: because nothing is certain, you may as well be consistent in following your "own truth," whether or not it is true for anyone else.

The opening pages of "Of Vertue" (II.29, also written around 1578-80)

present a model of sceptical constancy, in a passage as complex and problematic as any in Montaigne. The opening sentences outline, with confusing rapidity, the distinction made more clearly in "Of Drunkennesse" between "the sodaine fits and fantasies of the soule, and a resolute disposition and constant habitude." He concedes, in a manner so offhand that it sounds ironically condescending, that we can attain any degree of virtue, even godlike virtue - even (echoing one of Seneca's most hyperbolical claims) a virtue greater than God's - "But it is by fits." We may be raised by "a kinde of passion" above our normal selves for a brief moment; but such fits cannot last, and we soon subside from the heights back into our normal state of trivial inconstancy, "so that upon every slight occasion, for a bird lost, or for a glasse broken, wee suffer our selves to be mooved and distempered very neere as one of the vulgar sort." After all, anyone can be godlike for a few minutes; it is constancy (consistency, aequabilitas) which is the rare and truly valuable quality.

Except order, moderation and constancie, I imagine all things may bee done by an indifferent and defective man. Therefore say wisemen, that directly to judge of a man, his common actions must especially be controuled, and he must every day be surprised in his work-day clothes.

At this point, rather unexpectedly, Montaigne turns to Pyrrho, the sceptic "who framed so pleasant a Science of ignorance," and takes him as a exemplar of constancy.

And forasmuch as he maintained the weakenesse of mans judgement, to be so extreame, as it could take nor resolution, nor inclination [i.e. neither certainty nor even probability]: and would perpetually suspend it, ballancing, beholding and receiving all things, as indifferent: It is reported of him, that he ever kept himselfe after one fashion, looke and countenance....

He retells some of the traditional anecdotes about Pyrrho: that he would continue with a conversation even if the person he was talking to had left, or keep walking in a straight line even if there was a wall or a ditch in his path - since, sense-perceptions being unreliable, he saw no reason to let them affect his behaviour. More seriously, he would submit to surgical operations "with such constancy" that he was never even seen to twitch. Montaigne comments

It is something to bring the minde to these imaginations, but more to joine the effects unto it, yet is it not impossible. But to joine them with such perseverance and constancy, as to establish it for an ordinary course; verily in these enterprises so farre from common use, it is almost incredible to be done.

Then comes a deflating conclusion: Pyrrho was on one occasion seem to defend himself against being bitten by a dog, and had to apologise for this lapse in principle: "It is ... very hard, altogether to dispoile and
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shake off man."

The tone of this passage is mercurial: at one moment Pyrrho seems absurd, falling into ditches on stubborn principle; the next moment, on the operating table, he shows the heroism of a Stoic sapiens, and Montaigne's tribute to such "almost incredible" constancy seems sincere. Montaigne portrays Pyrrho as a man who actually succeeded in uniting the two senses of "constancy," practicing heroic steadfastness not "by fits" but almost consistently; who was always the same, unus idemque inter diversa, unmoved by outside influences, to the point both of superhuman heroism and of comic imperviousness to the realities of everyday life. Montaigne's equivocal tone, wavering between laughter and admiration, captures more clearly than any summary his equivocal response to such constancy.

It is unexpected, however, that Montaigne's epitome of constancy
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should be not a Stoic but the founder of scepticism. He suggests,

moreover, that Pyrrho's constancy is a logical consequence of his scepticism: "And forasmuch as he maintained the weakenesse of mans judgement ... he ever kept himselfe after one fashion" (my emphasis). Pyrrho carries to its logical conclusion (almost a reductio ad absurdum) the principle of sceptical constancy suggested in the "Apologie" and "Of Presumption": that, since everything is uncertain, you may as well stick consistently by your own opinions.

The principle, carried as far as Pyrrho carries it, is almost an Existentialist one: in the absence of an objective or absolute truth, one can only make an arbitrary choice of certain attitudes, beliefs and principles, and then maintain them rigidly. It is a philosophy of desperation. Shakespeare's Antony and Coriolanus each, in the later acts of their tragedies, make something like this kind of acte gratuit, arbitrarily committing themselves to a consistent course in order to maintain identity in an unmeaning world. Montaigne's Christian scepticism, however, will not go quite so far, and his half-comic treatment of Pyrrho suggests a drawing back from the implications of sceptical constancy. In the last essays of Book III he develops a more humane philosophy based not upon constancy but upon an acceptance of "the benefit of inconstancy."

[6] The benefit of inconstancy

The ideal developed in Montaigne's final essays is one of self-knowledge allied not so much with constancy as with an acceptance of inconstancy and imperfection. We must see ourselves and life clear-sightedly, and accept the "humane condition" for what it is, with humility and even enjoyment, rather than rejecting it in pursuit of impossible

perfections. To Stoic rigidity, self-denial and moral effort, he opposes an ideal of flexibility and humanity - not to be immovable, but to go with the flow.

"Of Three Commerces or Societies" (III.3, written c. 1586?) sums up this acceptance of inconstancy. "Life is a motion unequal, irregular and multiforme," and we must move with it, cultivating flexibility and diversity:

WE must not cleave so fast unto our humours and dispositions. Our chiefest sufficiency is, to apply our selves to divers fashions. It is a being, but not a life, to bee tied and bound by necessity to one onely course. The goodliest mindes are those that have most variety and pliableness in them. ⁹⁹

Montaigne has travelled some philosophical distance in the decade or so since he mourned over "the Inconstancie of Our Actions" and the fact that "there is as much difference found betweene us and our selves, as there is ¹⁰⁰ betweene our selves and other." Now, with a deeper understanding of his own inconsistencies, he accepts such inconstancy as necessary and even preferable to Stoic rigidity. To put the question in Shakespearean terms, he rejects the self-destructive inflexibility of Coriolanus' determination "not to be other than one thing," and chooses instead, like Antony, to pursue "infinite variety." At the same time, though we may see echoes of Montaigne's anti-Stoicism in Antony and Cleopatra, there is a great gulf between Montaigne's balanced, moderate hedonism and Antony's attempt to ¹⁰¹ embrace the "violence" of conflicting extremes.

Montaigne applies the same critical approach to his earlier Stoic precepts for dealing with pain and death. In "Of Diverting and Diversions" (III.4) he suggests that the most effective way of dealing with sorrow is not to face it down in the Stoic manner, but to distract the mind to less painful thoughts. He candidly admits that diversion can bring only temporary relief, but at least it works, whereas the remedies

of philosophers are generally "artificiall and ceremonious."

A sharpe conceit possesseth, and a violent imagination holdeth me:
I finde it a shorter course to alter and divert, then to tame and
vanquish the same: if I cannot substitute a contrary unto it, at
least I present another unto it. Change ever easeth, Varietie
dissolveth, and shifting dissipateth. If I cannot buckle with it,
I flie from it: and in shunning it, I stray and double from it.
... Nature proceedeth thus, by the benefit of inconstancy....¹⁰²

Instead of facing adversity with constancy - like the Senecan rock, storm-battered but immovable - Montaigne prefers to slip away from it.

Inconstancy can be a benefit, not a sin or a weakness. The very word "diversion" echoes Montaigne's earlier characterisation of human nature as "divers and wavering." It is this diversity and changeableness of both the world and our minds which allows us to find comfort in change and variety, rather than in a single-minded confrontation with the worst.¹⁰³

In "Of Vanitie" Montaigne turns the same idea into an apparent reply to Lipsius' De constantia.¹⁰⁴ Speaking of the pleasure and solace that he finds in travelling, he imagines a Stoic objection (along the lines of Langius's rebuke to Justus) that one cannot run away from the disturbances of one's own mind, and that true peace comes only from Stoic wisdom. No doubt (Montaigne retorts), but such exhortations to "be wise" are as unanswerable and as ineffectual as a doctor's command to "be healthy"; in the meantime, since he finds comfort in travel, why should he not take advantage of it? This may be "a testimony of unquietnesse and irresolution," but these, "to say truth, are our mistrisse and predominant qualities." The idealised theories of Lipsius and Seneca make no allowances for ordinary human beings who cannot attain Stoic constancy, but may obtain practical comfort from "varietie and the possession of diversitie."¹⁰⁵

Montaigne similarly criticises the Stoic treatment of death in "Of Physiognomy" (III.12, written c. 1585-8). Whereas for the early Montaigne

death was the most significant event in life, he now explicitly rejects the teleological fallacy: death

is indeed the end [bout], yet not the scope [but, i.e. aim] of life. It is her last, it is her extremity, yet not her object. Hir selfe must be unto hir selfe, hir aime, hir drift and her designe.

It is merely one episode in a man's life, and fevered attempts to prepare for it are a waste of time: "A quarter of an houre of passion without consequence and without annoyance, deserves not particular precepts."¹⁰⁶

Montaigne points out that ordinary peasants without any philosophical training, who have never given death a thought in their lives, can die with exemplary constancy and tranquillity. Montaigne once rejected this attitude to death as "brutall stupiditie"; now, having observed the courageous endurance of the common people of France during the civil wars, he urges "In Gods name ... let us henceforth keepe a schoole of
¹⁰⁷brutalitie." Simple natural instinct teaches the constancy which philosophy vainly strives for:

The greatest number of learning[']s instructions, to encourage us have more shew then force, and more ornament then fruit. Wee have forsaken nature, and yet wee will teach her her lesson....
[L]earning is compelled to goe daily a borrowing, thereby to make her disciples a patterne of constancy, of innocency and tranquillitie.¹⁰⁸

As in the "Apologie," Montaigne mocks and rejects the Stoic emphasis on reason as the one true way to virtue. Human reason is so "adulterated" and "sophisticated" that it has become merely opinion, "variable and peculiar to every man, and hath lost her proper, constant and universall
¹⁰⁹visage." We must look to animals or to simple uneducated people to learn true, natural virtue.

"Of Physiognomy" seems to sum up Montaigne's final judgement on Stoicism. He is still in sympathy with its aims: it is this late essay

that he speaks, in the passage quoted earlier, of the need in troubled times for "strong and vigorous provisions" against fear and suffering. Now, however, he finds Senecan Stoicism inadequate. It is preoccupied with death rather than life; it has an excessive faith in reason, which is sterile and unreliable and has little to do with the forces which actually move us; it is overly concerned with appearances and reputation; it is arrogant in its contempt for common humanity and its aspiration to divinity; it prescribes an inhuman virtue which is neither attainable by human nature unaided by God, nor indeed desirable at the cost of such severity and rigidity. There are other, more human and humane ways to attain the same ends.

"Of Experience" (III.13), the last of the Essays, and probably also the last written (c. 1587-8), perhaps comes closest to expressing
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Montaigne's final philosophy of life. Its tone, despite recurring images of death and human evil, is primarily one of cheerful, tolerant acceptance of life in its diversity and imperfection.

Our life is composed, as is the harmony of the World, of contrary things; so of divers tunes, some pleasant, some harsh, some sharpe, some flat, some low and some high: What would that Musition say, that should love but some one of them? He ought to know how to use them severally and how to entermingle them. So should we both of goods and evils, which are consubstantiall to our life. Our being cannot subsist without this commixture,
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whereto one side is no lesse necessary than the other.

To use a Shakespearian image, "The web of our life is of a mingled yarn,
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good and ill together." In this imperfect world our task is, not merely to endure, but as far as possible to enjoy life. We must accept our human condition for what it is, taking pleasure in the commonplace pleasures of life, not despising but accepting the body. We must recognise that "all is vanity," and, in recognising that, accept it as the nature of our condition.

My selfe, who brag so curiously to embrace and particularly to allow the commodities of life; whensoever I looke precisely into it I finde nothing therein but winde. But what? we are nothing but winde. And the very winde also, more wisely then we loveth to bluster and to be in agitation: And is pleased with his owne offices, without desiring stability or solidity; qualities that be not his owne.¹¹³

Our chief task is to recognise what qualities - or "offices," as Montaigne echoes Cicero's term - are proper to our human nature, and to live by these fully and cheerfully:

There is nothing so goodly, so faire and so lawfull as to play the man well and duely: Nor Science so hard and difficult, as to know how to live this life well. And of all the infirmities we have, the most savage, is to despise our being.¹¹⁴

The conclusion of "Of Experience" (and thus of the Essays) is, like that of the "Apologie," an attack on those who refuse to accept our human condition and, despising their being, seek to rise above it. Such excessive desire for perfection is, paradoxically, "savage"; in seeking to be superhuman they become subhuman. With calculated coarseness, Montaigne satirises the heaven-aspiring idealists who despise the body so much that they resent even the necessity to empty their bladders and bowels.

They will be exempted from them and escape man. It is meere folly, insteade of transforming themselves into Angels, they transchange themselves into beastes: in lieu of advancing, they abase themselves. Such transcending humours affright me as much, as steepy, high and inaccessible places.

. . . .
It is an absolute perfection, and as it were divine for a man to know how to enjoy his being loyally. We seeke for other conditions because we understand not the use of ours: and goe out of our selves, forsomuch as we know not what abiding there is. Wee may long enough get upon stilts, for be wee upon them, yet must we goe with our owne legges. And sit we upon the highest throne of the World, yet sit we upon our owne taile. The best and most commendable lives, and best pleasing men are (in my conceit) those which with order are fitted, and with decorum are ranged to the common mould and humane model: but without wonder or extravagancy.¹¹⁵

Montaigne's conclusion thus returns to Cicero's ideal of decorum, in its universal sense. ¹¹⁶ Our hardest and most important task is to recognise what is appropriate to the role of a human being, and to fulfil that role with grace and decorum - "to play the man well and duely."

Whether or not we take this passage as a final summing-up (and the mode of Montaigne's thought seems to preclude finality), it does sum up some of his leading themes: the folly and arrogance of aspiring to divinity, the need for self-knowledge and acceptance of the comically imperfect realities of our human condition. It thus seems equally relevant as a critique of the theories of Seneca and Lipsius, or of the acts of Shakespeare's Caesar, Brutus, and Coriolanus.

[7] Montaigne, Shakespeare, and the critique of constancy

What, then, was the nature of Shakespeare's relationship with Montaigne? Scholars such as Robertson and Hooker have suggested that Shakespeare derived much of his knowledge of Stoicism and his Stoic maxims from Montaigne rather than from the classical sources - a tenable point of view, though virtually impossible to prove, given the wide currency of the ideas. I believe, however, that there is a closer and more interesting similarity between Shakespeare's and Montaigne's criticisms of Stoicism and constancy.

Inconstancy and constancy are central preoccupations of Montaigne throughout the essays. He develops from an early Neostoic belief in constancy as the best response to a mutable world, to a belief that it is an unattainable and perhaps undesirable ideal: the ineradicable

inconstancy of things and of human nature, which makes us desire constancy, also makes it impossible to achieve. Shakespeare, though he does not seem to undergo such a change of attitude (either in the Roman plays or in his work as a whole), shows a similar sense of the problem. His Rome stands for stability in a mutable world, but his Romans are unable to achieve their ideal of constancy. In Julius Caesar the characters seek immovable rationality but are swayed by unacknowledged emotions; in Antony and Cleopatra, which seems most influenced by Montaigne, the confusion of a world in flux is matched by the mercurial and unpredictable changes in the minds and emotions of the characters.

Montaigne and Shakespeare thus share an ambivalent view of the Stoic ideal of constancy, best summed up by Montaigne at the end of the "Apologie": "a profitable desire; but likewise absurd." Both are attracted to the idea that constancy is "the last perfection" of the mind, that "were man / But constant, he were perfect."¹¹⁷ If perfection through constancy means, however, to rise above humanity to godlike stature, Montaigne sees the aspiration as absurd, and Shakespeare, in his portrayal of Caesar and Coriolanus, shows it as doomed to tragic or bathetic failure.

Such criticisms, and even such ambivalence, are traditionally Christian; but Montaigne and Shakespeare also share more subtle and original insights. Both are sensitive to the internal contradictions of "constancy" - the fact that being "always the same" may mean quite different and incompatible things. Shakespeare's sense throughout the Roman plays of the tension between constancy as a heroic virtue and constancy as the maintenance of a consistent outward appearance, for instance, may well owe something to Montaigne's insight in "Of Drunkenness": that the immovable and invulnerable constancy of Seneca's sapiens is a state not of rational tranquillity but of heroic madness, and

one which cannot be sustained consistently. It is a judgement very applicable to the heroic but hardly Stoic constancy of Coriolanus.

Even more relevant to Shakespeare, in my view, is Montaigne's suggestion (especially in the "Apologie" and "Of Vertue") that constancy may be the product of scepticism rather than knowledge. In a world in which nothing is certain, we can achieve order and stability only by following an arbitrary but consistent code, whether it is a set of personal beliefs (like Pyrrho's) or a set of social conventions. Such an insight underlies Shakespeare's subversive insistence on the association of constancy with opinion in Rome: Roman constancy is a matter of following consistently an arbitrary set of Roman values. The point is made most clearly, once again, in Coriolanus, who (like Pyrrho) pursues his "own truth" with a fanatical and irrational consistency.

Both Montaigne and Shakespeare are aware that such an insistence on being always the same can be heroic, but also rigid, absurd, and dangerous. In his late essays, Montaigne's critique of constancy leads him completely beyond the Stoic tradition, to develop an alternative ideal based upon "variety and pliability" and "the benefit of inconstancy." Shakespeare, I believe, directly and sympathetically embodies this ideal in Antony and Cleopatra. Nevertheless, the disastrous results of Antony's pursuit of it suggest that in Shakespeare's view, "the benefit of inconstancy" may be no more adequate than that of constancy in dealing with a mutable world.

Despite their criticisms of the constancy ideal, and Shakespeare's apparent scepticism about Montaigne's alternative to it, the two share a sympathy with the Stoic values behind Cicero's decorum: consistency with nature, and self-knowledge. The tragic flaw of Shakespeare's Romans is a lack of such self-knowledge, either of themselves as individuals rather than as public role-players, or of their capacities and limits as human

beings. In their pursuit of constancy, they are unable or unwilling to follow Menenius' advice to "turn your eyes toward the napes of your necks,¹¹⁸ and make but an interior survey of your good selves."

Montaigne's treatment of the idea of constancy seems closer to Shakespeare's than that of any other writer in the tradition. The similarities are in ideas and attitudes, not in verbal borrowings, and it is impossible to prove direct influence. Nevertheless, it seems to me plausible that that it was Shakespeare's reading of the Essays which brought together in his mind a number of elements - the constancy of the Senecan hero, Cicero's decorum, the Neostoic cult of constancy, Stoic opinion and Montaigne's scepticism, his own sense of mutability - and focused them on the idea of constancy as the key to Roman virtue.

The differences in their treatment of the theme reflect a difference of temperament which has been sensed by several critics who have discussed the relationship.¹¹⁹ To put it very crudely, Montaigne has an essentially comic, Shakespeare an essentially tragic sense of life. Montaigne is a detached and ironic observer, who, in spite of his early insecurities, finally finds human inconstancy (including his own) fascinating and amusing rather than tragic. Shakespeare, as he did with Cicero's treatment of decorum, perceives the tragic potentialities in the pursuit of the impossible ideal of constancy. Even when he treats in Antony and Cleopatra a response to life based upon a Montaigne-like acceptance of inconstancy, he pushes it towards an extreme and so to a tragic conclusion which shows that this, too, is not for him a final solution to the problems of constancy.

PART THREE

**SHAKESPEARE'S
CONSTANT ROMANS**

CHAPTER EIGHT

"FORMAL CONSTANCY":

JULIUS CAESAR

[1] Introduction

In these final three chapters I shall examine Shakespeare's treatment of the idea of constancy in Julius Caesar, Coriolanus, and Antony and Cleopatra. In making this a central issue in the plays Shakespeare is building upon the hints of a "constancy triptych" in North's Plutarch. He also draws, however, upon the various traditions I have dealt with in earlier chapters: Stoic constantia, as preached by Seneca and revived in the Neostoic cult of constancy; Cicero's decorum; the Christian objections to Stoicism, and Montaigne's more subtle critique of constancy in its various forms. Shakespeare portrays constancy both as a Roman virtue which derives from Rome's peculiar moral and social values, and as a universal human aspiration: the desire for a moral perfection unchanged by the world's changes. The potential incompatibility between these two aspects of constancy is one of the underlying themes of the plays.

Shakespeare is not original, of course, in associating constancy with Rome.¹ Ever since Cicero it has been a commonplace to identify Roman and Stoic virtue. Many of the traditional Roman virtues (as defined by the Romans themselves and by later tradition) may be seen as aspects of the central virtue of constancy: courage and fortitude, justice, temperance

and self-control, fides (loyalty and keeping one's word), gravitas - all involve steadiness and steadfastness, a refusal to be shifted from one's duty by emotional or external forces. Rome itself is a traditional symbol of constancy and permanence: the urbs aeterna, everlasting Rome, with its straight roads and marble columns and arches, enduring even in ruins - though those ruins also imply the limits of worldly constancy. Shakespeare sets the firmness of Rome against a problematic world of uncertainty and mutability, in which even the eternal city may be threatened with melting into the Tiber. It is in protection against such a world that Shakespeare's Romans clutch at constancy - that of the city and of their own constant souls: an ideal which may seem limited, rigid, or self-deceiving, but which provides a stable point of reference in a world with no more absolute values to hold to.

Shakespeare's Roman constancy combines elements of the two traditions I have discussed: Senecan Stoic constancy and Ciceronian decorum. Both ideals depend on being always the same, but the first stresses inner steadfastness of soul, the second consistency in public behaviour. In Shakespeare's Rome, however, both tend to become public and external. Shakespeare's Romans are actors, performing roles that others have cast them in, and showing moral heroism by denying what they really feel. Their tragic flaw is a lack of self-knowledge, in both of the senses which Montaigne analyses: a vanity which fails to recognise the limitations of human nature, and a concern for appearances and opinion which replaces self-knowledge. Their decorum is flawed by the artificiality of the roles they try to play, while their attempts to rise to godlike constancy are brought down to earth by the clash between their aspirations and reality.

In Julius Caesar the nature and problems of Roman constancy are summed up in Brutus' lines from which I take my thesis title:

Let not our looks put on our purposes,
 But bear it as our Roman actors do,
 With untir'd spirits and formal constancy.²

On the surface, Brutus is simply urging his fellow conspirators to conceal their intentions, but his words suggest wider implications. "Formal constancy" means (as Dover Wilson noted) "consistent decorum": playing one's part without slipping out of character.³ "Untir'd spirits," however, suggests the Stoic sense of constancy: souls which do not tire, but respond to adversity with steadfastness and resolute endurance. The ideals of Senecan constancy and Ciceronian decorum are thus linked. At the same time, they are both enclosed within a theatrical metaphor: these are the qualities of "our Roman actors." The specifying of "Roman actors" may be Shakespeare's allusion to the passage on actors in De officiis; it also seems to imply a logical connection between being Roman and constant and being an actor. In the context of this image, we may see a potential incongruity between the two halves of the line - between the inner spiritual strength of an "untir'd spirit," and the public hypocrisy of assuming a merely "formal" constancy. This incongruity is underlined by a submerged pun (which has not, I think, been noted) in "untir'd": in the context set up by "put on," "actors," and "formal," it suggests the image of theatrical "tires" or costumes, and so of "untir'd spirits" as souls⁴ which appear naked and undisguised, not assuming a "formal" appearance. The tension between the two halves of the line emphasises the central problem: does Roman "constancy" mean spiritual integrity or external role-playing, and are the two compatible?⁵

The importance of Stoicism and constancy in Julius Caesar has been demonstrated in several studies.⁶ Many critics have discussed the play's use of the image of acting,⁷ and its treatment of the problems of knowledge, judgement, and error.⁸ My perception of these as central themes of the play is not original. By placing them in the context of the

tradition explored in this thesis, however, I hope to demonstrate a more complex relationship between them than has previously been perceived, and so clarify Shakespeare's attitude towards Roman constancy in his first treatment of the theme.

Constancy is indeed central to the Roman ethic of Julius Caesar, and the desire to be unmoved is shown (in a way its severer critics have failed to acknowledge) as a natural response to a world which, behind the apparent marble stability of Rome, is mutable and mysterious. Roman constancy, however, is not a simple thing: it is a compound of Senecan constancy and Ciceronian decorum, and there is a potential tension between the two - between heroic aspiration and role-playing, between self-sufficiency and the fulfillment of public officia. Behind this tension lies the ironic relationship, which no critic has fully perceived, between constancy and opinion. The Rome of Julius Caesar is governed by opinion - not only because its citizens are prone to factual and moral error, but also because, in the absence of absolute values, its society is dominated by public judgements. The play's central irony is that the Romans, pursuing constancy, are in fact ruled by its arch-enemy, opinion. They seek to be "constant" in playing with decorum the roles in which they are cast by Roman opinion; even the aspirations of Caesar or Brutus to a godlike constancy are histrionic, a matter of acting a heroic role they cannot in reality sustain. For all its nobility, the Roman constancy of Julius Caesar is based on false opinion and pretence, and the strain of maintaining the pretence leads naturally to death.

[2] "A thing unfirm": the world of Julius Caesar

Why are Shakespeare's Romans so concerned with constancy? Although it is a traditional Roman virtue, Shakespeare portrays it as a response to the peculiar imaginative world of the play, one in which the stability and certainty of Rome are set against a background of mutability, uncertainty, and mystery which seem to reign outside Rome's walls.

The most potent embodiment of this background is the storm, in which Rome is invaded by unnatural and inexplicable disorder: wild beasts roam near the Capitol, the dead walk the streets, battles are fought in the sky - "all these things change from their ordinance, / Their natures and preformed faculties, / To monstrous quality." "Are you not mov'd," Casca demands of Cicero, "when all the sway of earth / Shakes like a thing unfirm?" The "sway" of Rome, its civilised political order, is shown (as the ironic pun suggests) to rest on shaky foundations.⁹

The storm is all the more more terrifying because, though it seems meaningful, its meaning is obscure. Characters suggest a number of incompatible explanations: a sign of "civil strife in heaven" or coming apocalypse (Casca), a reflection of the unnaturalness of Caesar's tyranny (Cassius), a portent of Caesar's death (Calphurnia) or of some other catastrophe (Caesar), or simply a natural phenomenon. Cicero, who seems to take this last view, sums up:

Indeed, it is a strange-disposed time;
But men may construe things after their fashion,
Clean from the purpose of the things themselves.¹⁰

The storm may be seen as a paradigm of the play as a whole, and these lines as a crucial choric comment. Most critics now agree that Julius Caesar is a "problem play," in which the difficulty of judging the characters and events is vital to the play's effect, and in which problems

of perception and judgement are important themes. The action of the play revolves around such problems: most centrally, the problem (for both characters and audience) of judging Caesar, and the error of Brutus in deciding that to kill him will bring freedom to Rome.

The disorder, uncertainty, and irrationality of the storm scenes colour the imaginative world of Julius Caesar to a surprising degree, despite the apparent "Roman" clarity and simplicity of its style and structure. All the major characters are complex, changing from moment to moment, inviting (and receiving from critics) contradictory responses. Despite their insistence on rationality, they are in fact moved by emotions and motives which they do not fully understand; the play has a strong undercurrent of powerful, repressed emotions, reflected in the imagery of fire, blood, and violence. Similarly, the macrocosm of Rome rests upon the plebeians, who are dominated by emotion and caprice, with a dangerous capacity for violence which, at the play's turning-point, in fact controls Rome's destiny. Partly because of this, Rome itself is in an unstable state, in the process of change from an old to a new order. The main characters attempt to predict and control this process, but we know in hindsight that their predictions are wrong and their actions tragically misguided. They move and act in darkness, unsure of anything, and there is no higher order beyond the secular world of Rome in which they can put their faith. Looking into the future near the end of the play, Brutus and Cassius see only that "the affairs of men rest still uncertain," and Brutus utters a heartfelt prayer:

O that a man might know
The end of this day's business ere it come!
But it sufficeth that the day will end,
And then the end is known.

Brutus' response to the uncertainty of life is a Stoic fatalism: since it is impossible to predict or control the future, one must be prepared to

accept whatever happens with courage and calmness.

The world of Julius Caesar is, indeed, one which naturally leads to Stoicism. Although theoretically Stoic ethics rests upon a dogmatic epistemology which draws the sharpest possible distinction between knowledge and opinion, the close association between Stoicism and scepticism in the Renaissance suggests that it can equally be a response to uncertainty and ignorance - a point made most clearly in Montaigne's account of the sceptic Pyrrho in "Of Vertue."¹⁴ Denying the possibility of rational knowledge, Pyrrho imposed order on his world by practising an unbending consistency. Shakespeare's Romans are doing something rather similar - though without consciously recognising the artificiality and arbitrariness of their assumptions - when, in the midst of mutability, uncertainty, irrational and unpredictable change, they seek to create their own constancy. They do so partly through the permanence and stability of Roman institutions and traditions, and partly by aspiring as individuals to the virtue of constancy: to be unmoved, unchanged, always the same, rationally consistent and predictable, in a changing world. The central ideal of Shakespeare's Roman morality is to be (in Casca's words)¹⁵ "not mov'd, when all the sway of earth / Shakes like a thing unfirm."

[3] "True-fix'd and resting quality": Senecan constancy

The ideal of being unmoved is, of course, that of Stoic constancy. As critics have noted, some of the Romans of Julius Caesar (most obviously Brutus and Caesar) practice a Stoic concept of virtue, based upon resolution, rationality, control of emotion, and indifference to pain and death, which can rise to a claim of being superhuman or godlike.¹⁶ It is most memorably expressed in Caesar's speech just before he is murdered:

I could be well mov'd, if I were as you;
 If I could pray to move, prayers would move me;
 But I am constant as the northern star,
 Of whose true-fix'd and resting quality
 There is no fellow in the firmament. ...¹⁷

Caesar's "mov'd" is a complex word. In refusing to be "mov'd" he is at once asserting his will, refusing to be moved by emotion, and claiming a Stoic invulnerability to outside pressures. The most obvious sense is the assertion of immovable will: Caesar refuses to change his mind about Cimber's banishment, and so "turn pre-ordinance and first decree / Into the law of children" (that is, mere caprice). Brutus takes a very similar attitude later in the play in refusing to compromise over the punishment of Lucius Pella - a decision which North, in the "Life of Brutus," sees as displaying "wonderfull constancy."¹⁸ In either case, not knowing the facts, we may admire their firmness of principle or condemn their rigid obstinacy. It is clear that both find a virtue in refusing to change their minds, and that this leads them both into obstinacy and hence into disastrous errors: Brutus when he repeatedly overrules Cassius' better judgement, Caesar when (after his indecision) he insists upon going to the Senate and on refusing to listen to the warnings of the soothsayer and Artemidorus. Shakespeare repeatedly uses "move" in the sense "urge, persuade," and Brutus, in telling Cassius, "I would not ... / Be any further mov'd," is expressing a typical attitude. The same word is used of the effect of Antony's oration on the plebeians, who are only too easily and literally "mov'd" into a frenzy of destructive motion.¹⁹

In all these uses, another sense of "mov'd" is also implied: that of allowing one's emotions to be aroused. Caesar is not only refusing to change his mind, but denying that he "bears such rebel blood" as to allow himself to be swayed by emotional appeals and flattery.²⁰ Brutus acknowledges that Caesar shares his own Stoic ideal of pure rationality: "I have not known when his affections sway'd / More than his reason." It

does not occur to him that to refuse to be swayed at all by "affections" (either emotions or friendships) may be as tyrannical as to be governed by them.²¹ He acts on these principles in deciding to kill Caesar, setting aside his personal affection and the fact that he has "no personal cause" to harm him,²² and relying instead on abstract reasoning. His impatience with Cassius' failure to think in this way emerges in the quarrel scene, where he is merely contemptuous of Cassius' appeals to friendship or anger:

Go show your slaves how choleric you are,
And make your bondmen tremble. Must I budge? ...
By the gods,
You shall digest the venom of your spleen
Though it do split you....

Brutus, who refuses to be moved by his own passions, will not "budge" in the face of Cassius'; Cassius must swallow and suppress his anger, as Brutus does, painful and even self-destructive as such repression may be.²³

Brutus' Stoic view of emotion is most clearly seen in his advice to the conspirators on the frame of mind in which they must kill Caesar:

And, gentle friends,
Let's kill him boldly, but not wrathfully...
And let our hearts, as subtle masters do,
Stir up their servants to an act of rage,
And after seem to chide 'em.

Brutus (as I have suggested earlier) here sums up the Stoic view that the good man must "boldly" do what he knows to be right without being confused by emotion. In the course of the lines, however, this simple moral doctrine runs into confusion. Brutus, apparently aware that it is impossible to murder a man in a spirit of cool reasonableness without some passion, ascribes this "rage" not to the heart or soul but to what he elsewhere calls "the mortal instruments": the physical and instinctive

side of human nature. The heart will make use of passion, while remaining detached from it and afterwards disavowing it. Brutus thus demands an impossible disjunction between mind and emotions, and a repellent hypocrisy, as by his simile he puts himself in the position of a man who orders a crime and then disclaims responsibility for it.²⁴

As these lines imply, Shakespeare rejects the Stoic idea of apatheia, absence of emotion, and does so on quite traditional lines. As Antony tells the plebeians, "You are not wood, you are not stones, but men."²⁵ Shakespeare is invoking the traditional image of the Stoic as stock, and he rejects the ideal behind it: such passionlessness is unnatural, undesirable, and unattainable. In fact, as I have suggested, Shakespeare's Romans are not passionless. The plebeians, of course, are governed by emotion, and Antony, who does not conform to the Stoic ethics followed by most of his class, is quick and open in his feelings, though also capable of coolly exploiting them in order to "move" the plebeians. The mob violence which follows demonstrates the dangerous power of passion uncontrolled by reason. Suppressed emotions, however, can be equally dangerous; and this is what we see in the other patricians, who, behind their facade of calm rationality, are more strongly influenced by emotion than they are prepared to acknowledge. The immovable Caesar, torn by fear, ambition, and dread of ridicule, vacillates between his wife's emotional appeals and Decius' flattery; the shrewd Cassius agrees to a disastrous plan of battle to avoid further upsetting his friend Brutus; Brutus, who thinks he is motivated purely by reason in deciding to kill Caesar, fails to realise how much he is influenced by personal pride and desire for the good opinion of others. Shakespeare seems very modern in his sense of the dangerous power of repressed feelings to influence our actions, all the more strongly because they are denied expression.²⁶

The effect of Stoic constancy on Shakespeare's Romans is not the

eradication of emotion, but the suppression and concealment of it. Brutus, though troubled by "passions of some difference," which he calls in soliloquy a civil war within his soul, "turn[s] the trouble of [his] countenance / Merely upon [him]self," and attempts to pass off his distress even to his wife as merely physical illness.²⁷ "Constancy," when the word is used explicitly, refers more often than not to the concealment of perturbation, pain, or fear. Brutus' exhortation to "formal constancy" comes as he advises the conspirators to conceal their true thoughts and feelings; and when, shortly before the murder, he urges "Cassius, be constant," he means primarily "Control yourself, don't give the game away by panic." Portia makes "strong proof of her constancy" by giving herself "a voluntary wound" and concealing it without showing any sign of pain - so proving herself more constant than Brutus, who has been unable to hide his distress from her. Later, finding her constancy giving way when her husband is in danger, and fearful of betraying the conspiracy in her agitation, she prays,

O constancy, be strong upon my side!
Set a huge mountain 'tween my heart and tongue!²⁸

Constancy is here conceived not as freedom from suffering but as repression of it; its function is to stop up the passage between feeling and expression. The power of the image is increased by the ambiguity of "upon my side," which suggests an oppressive weight pressing upon the chest and heart.²⁹ Constancy, in Julius Caesar, is not so much the superhuman imperviousness to suffering of Seneca's sapiens, as the ability to pretend to be impervious - like Seneca's gladiator in De constantia sapientis,³⁰ who, though wounded, "maketh shew that it is nothing."

The third sense of being "unmoved" is the Stoic claim of indifference and invulnerability to external evils. Cassius sums up this doctrine when he tells Brutus, rather glibly,

Of your philosophy you make no use,
If you give place to accidental evils.³¹

The essence of Stoic philosophy is to enable us to endure "accidental evils" steadfastly, without "giv[ing] place" to them, in the knowledge that such things are indifferent. Brutus uses the Stoic term when he claims to look on honour and death "indifferently," and Cassius picks it up when he tells Casca, "I am arm'd, / And dangers are to me
32
indifferent."

This form of constancy is most clearly seen in the Stoic attitude to death. In the passages just quoted, Brutus is claiming indifference to death, while Cassius is boasting in a very Senecan manner of the ease of suicide as a path to liberty. Brutus is at his most Stoic when he greets the news of Portia's death with

Why, farewell, Portia. We must die, Messala.
With meditating that she must die once [i.e. at some time],
I have the patience to endure it now.³³

This is the attitude to death preached by Seneca and the early Montaigne: conquest of the fear of death by a courageous and unflinching contemplation of its inevitability. We hear the same note - a kind of grim attempt to outstare the inevitable - in Caesar's words when threatened with death. It is not death but only the fear of death which is an evil:

Cowards die many times before their deaths:
The valiant never taste of death but once.
Of all the wonders that I yet have heard,
It seems to me most strange that men should fear,
Seeing that death, a necessary end,
Will come when it will come.³⁴

We are aware, however, that Brutus' Stoic indifference is assumed, and a note of strained overstatement in Caesar's lines makes us suspect that he,

too, does not find the fear of death as incomprehensible as he claims. What in fact lies behind the Roman defiance of death is made clearer as Brutus and Casca stand over Caesar's body:

BRUTUS. Fates, we will know your pleasures.
 That we shall die, we know; 'tis but the time,
 And drawing days out, that men stand upon.
 [CASCA]. Why, he that cuts off twenty years of life
 Cuts off so many years of fearing death.
 BRUTUS. Grant that, and then is death a benefit.
 So are we Caesar's friends, that have abridg'd
 His time of fearing death.³⁵

Brutus nobly voices Stoic indifference to death; Casca takes the idea a step further by suggesting that they have really done Caesar a favour in killing him; Brutus, anxious to clutch at this rationalisation, accepts the premise, and so stumbles into a reductio ad absurdum of the Stoic view: it is better to be dead than alive, because when you are dead you can no longer fear death.

In Shakespeare's Romans, as in Seneca, Stoic acceptance of death is always on the point of turning into a positive death-wish. For Brutus - and possibly for Caesar too - death really is a relief from "so many years of fearing death," and from the strain of denying that fear. Cassius celebrates suicide, but the note which comes through is one of weariness ("life, being weary of these worldly bars"); and Brutus, as I shall argue later, dies with positive relief: "my bones would rest...."³⁶

All of these aspects of Stoic constancy add up to a claim to rise above humanity, to "escape man" (in Montaigne's phrase), by denying the weakness and mutability of the human condition. It is manifested especially in a concentration upon the mind and spirit, and a neglect and abuse of the body, which recall Cicero's criticisms in De finibus of the one-sided intellectualism of the Stoics.³⁷ The Stoic contempt of the body

is suggested in such details as Portia's voluntary wound and Brutus' reluctance to sleep ("nature must obey necessity, / Which we will niggard with a little rest"); it culminates in suicide, the destruction of the body to preserve the integrity of the mind.³⁸ Shakespeare implicitly criticises this one-sidedness in his stress on the physical weakness and illness of many of the characters: Caesar's deafness and epilepsy, fever and near-drowning; the near-sightedness of the "lean and hungry" Cassius; Ligarius' ague; the sleeplessness of Calphurnia and Brutus; Portia's faintness; Brutus' pretence of illness, which only disguises "some sick offence within [his] mind." In such episodes as Caesar's epileptic fit at the moment he is offered the crown, and the fatal short-sightedness of the "great observer" Cassius, we may see Nature reminding the Romans (in Montaigne's words) of the "mortalitie ... and insipiditie" of the human condition, by forcing them to acknowledge flaws "inexpugnable unto our reason, and to the Stoicke virtue."³⁹

The apotheosis of constancy in the play is Caesar's "northern star" speech, in which the claim to be unmoved is exalted into an assertion of near-divinity: Caesar claims, in the words of Lipsius, "that great title, the neerest that man can have to God, To be immooveable." In comparing himself to the pole star he claims to be the one unmoving point in a mutable world; the comparison with Mount Olympus, apart from its obvious meaning of immovable bulk, suggests Seneca's metaphors for constancy - the hardness of rock, and the untouchability of the gods. Caesar is aspiring to be more than human. In referring to the rest of mankind as "flesh and blood, and apprehensive" (i.e. possessing senses), he grants them only the lower physical attributes of humanity (to quote Lipsius again, "the filth of the bodie and contagion of the senses"), while he alone, by implication, is a fully rational being.⁴⁰ He has earlier implied, however, that he sees himself as lacking the "flesh and blood" of normal

humanity, when he declares that his blood will not "be thaw'd from the true quality / With that which melteth fools...." Blood is normally liquid, and does not require to be thawed or melted; Caesar, like Angelo in Measure for Measure (another character who, as his name suggests, attempts to raise himself above humanity by purely rational virtue), "scarce confesses / That his blood flows." In his claim of absolute immovability, Caesar is envisaging himself as an inhuman creature, ice-cold and stone-hard - like the Stoic-stock of the anti-Stoic tradition.⁴¹ The claim, of course, is shown to be ironically false. We have seen Caesar's human inconstancy in the previous scene, and in a moment we will see a conclusive demonstration of his flesh-and-blood humanity, as "the northern star" and "Olympus" is reduced to a "bleeding piece of earth" on the Senate floor.⁴²

The exposure of the hollowness of Caesar's constancy here is important not only in itself but for the light it sheds on Brutus, for the two are distorted mirror-images of each other.⁴³ Brutus is a more human and sympathetic character, and his ideals are clearly sincere, whereas it is hard to determine how far, if at all, Caesar believes in his own claims. Yet Brutus is like Caesar in his desire to rise above humanity by achieving an impossible degree of rationality, consistency, and imperturbability. When he claims to be "arm'd so strong in honesty" that he is indifferent to Cassius' threats, he is not merely being priggish or self-righteous, but voicing an ideal of constancy, based upon reason and virtue, which is immovable and invulnerable by any external force.⁴⁴ It is an admirable ideal, but Shakespeare shows that it is not humanly attainable, and that the pursuit of it involves Brutus in moral error, rigidity, cruelty - and, most of all, pretence, for although he cannot in fact be absolutely constant, he must pretend to himself and others that he is.

Shakespeare's Stoic characters in Julius Caesar are not (as critics such as Anson and Vawter have too harshly alleged) inhuman, insane, or evil. Their ideal of constancy is in many ways a noble one (even Caesar's invocation of the northern star is splendid as well as arrogant), and an understandable response to the desire for stability in an unstable world. It is, to cite Montaigne's formula again, "a profitable desire; but likewise absurd." It is not humanly achievable, and because of this it involves them, despite their ideals of rationality and honesty, in continual pretence and self-deception. Shakespeare's Roman Stoicism is, as Senecan Stoicism always tends to be, an ethic of poses.

Shakespeare's attitude to Stoic constancy is essentially traditional, and has been well analysed by earlier critics. What I believe is original in his treatment, and has not been fully explored, is the link he establishes between this Stoic virtue and the nature of Rome's society and ethos. As Stoic constancy rests upon pretence and self-deception, Shakespeare shows it to be a natural development of a society preoccupied with appearances, opinion, honour, and decorum. Ironically, the ethic of constancy arises out of a Rome ruled by the "opinion" which for Seneca and the Neostoics is the arch-enemy of constancy.

[4] Roman opinion

The central paradox of Julius Caesar is the relationship between the Senecan constancy of its heroes, and the Roman society which produces them. An ethic for the heroic individual who aspires to rise above humanity and achieve godhead is the product of a society whose values are purely public, secular, and earthbound; an ethic which rests upon reason and knowledge is the product of a society governed by opinion.

The Romans of Julius Caesar define virtue as "being Roman." They are obsessively conscious of their own Roman identity in a way not paralleled by the members of any society in Shakespeare's non-Roman plays. The words "Rome" and "Roman" recur seventy-three times in the dialogue. They are moreover not merely neutral labels, but have a normative force, implying moral values.⁴⁵

Cassius tells the conspirators to "show yourselves true Romans": that is, courageous and loyal to their cause. Brutus urges Messala, "Now, as you are a Roman, tell me true," and Messala replies, "Then like a Roman bear the truth I tell": to be a Roman implies truthfulness, courage and stoical endurance. To "be a Roman" in this sense, to live up fully to the virtues the word implies, is the highest possible praise: Brutus' epitaph for Cassius is "The last of all the Romans." To fail to live up to those virtues is to show oneself no true Roman: every drop of blood that a Roman bears is guilty of "bastardy" - is not truly Roman - if he breaks even "the smallest particle" of his

promised word.⁴⁶ The virtues which constitute Romanness are for the most part admirable. Nevertheless, this elevation of a place-name into a moral norm seems arrogant, even faintly absurd, and morally problematic in its self-defining, self-referential nature. Roman virtue is defined as what Romans do; but what if Romans are doing wrong? By what standard can Rome itself be judged?

The problems of the idea of Romanness are similar to those raised by the concept of "honour," another keyword of the play. What is "Roman" and hence praiseworthy is defined by the opinions of other Romans, by honour, fame, and reputation. But what is honour? Brutus identifies it with "the general good":

If it be aught toward the general good,
Set honour in one eye and death i'th'other,
And I will look on both indifferently;
For let the gods so speed me as I love
The name of honour more than I fear death.

CASSIUS. I know that virtue to be in you, Brutus,
 As well as I do know your outward favour.
 Well, honour is the subject of my story.

The honour that is the subject of Cassius' story, however, seems rather different to Brutus'. He is concerned with public fame and recognition, the contrast between the "honours that are heap'd on Caesar" and the obscure "dishonourable graves" to which others like himself are relegated. Honour, for Cassius, is (as his phrase betrays) a matter of "outward favour" rather than an inner quality. By his deliberate confusion of the two views of honour, he shows how Brutus' "honourable metal may be wrought / From that it is dispos'd."⁴⁷ Later, in the Forum, by Antony's hammering repetition, the word "honourable" itself is wrought into another shape, so that the crowd revile Brutus' honour as villainy. Brutus, who begged them to "believe me for mine honour," can have no easy answer, for how can "honour" be defined except as that which others regard as honourable?⁴⁸

As I have shown in earlier chapters, these are questions urgently debated in the sixteenth century by Neostoics and by sceptics such as Montaigne. Shakespeare's Rome may be seen, in the light of this tradition of thought, as a society governed by Opinion (in the Neostoic sense). It erects its own standards into moral absolutes, and is dominated by the fallible and fickle judgements of public opinion. The problematic quality of Julius Caesar and its preoccupation with epistemological questions are thus thematically related to its Roman setting. Such problems are, of course, not exclusively Roman. The Romans, however, are peculiarly prone to them because, as pagans, they lack an absolute standard of truth, and move in a world which is ultimately mysterious. To "construe things after their fashion," they rely too purely upon human reason, failing to recognise that they are in fact being guided by Roman opinion. As Montaigne cynically commented in the "Apologie," "humane reason" and

opinion can be hard to distinguish in their "inconstant vanitie and vaine
 49
 inconstancy."

Truth, in Shakespeare's Rome, is constituted by judgements publicly arrived at by Romans. The "public temper" of Rome (to return to Eliot's phrase which I used earlier to characterise Cicero's public morality) is reflected in the importance of rhetoric in the play. The style of the play, as many critics have noted, is rhetorical - public language developing public arguments, in which the complexities of private thought and feeling emerge only through unexpressed implication. 50 Many of the play's central episodes are scenes of persuasion, as one character seeks by rhetorical means to convert others to his (real or assumed) opinion. Rhetoric predominates in private as in public: Caesar addresses his wife like a public meeting, and is swayed by the rival arguments of Calphurnia and Decius as the crowd in the Forum is swayed by Brutus and Antony. Even soliloquies are rhetorical: Brutus' orchard soliloquy is really a persuasio to himself to kill Caesar.

Another manifestation of Roman opinion is the motif of observation: characters continually observe one another and seek to "construe" their behaviour. The motif dominates the opening scenes: everyone observes Caesar, obsequiously or suspiciously; Caesar observes and judges the soothsayer and Cassius; Casca observes and reports the crown ceremony; Cassius tells Brutus, "I do observe you now of late," and Brutus urges him 51 not to "construe" his actions wrongly. By this process of observing and interpreting outward appearances Shakespeare's Romans arrive at judgements of one another - though they are often, like Caesar's assessment of the soothsayer, dubious, oversimplified, or positively wrong.

In this society there is a constant temptation to confuse appearances with realities, and what seems true (or can be made to seem true) with what is true. "Fashion it thus," Brutus tells himself, construing

Caesar's actions after his own fashion, and so making himself believe what
 he wants to believe.⁵² The conspirators want Brutus to be part of their
 plot because, as Casca puts it,

he sits high in all the people's hearts;
 And that which would appear offence in us
 His countenance, like richest alchemy,
 Will change to virtue and to worthiness.

Metellus uses the same argument later when he suggests that Cicero be
 asked to join (an echo which casts some ironic light on Brutus' strong
 objection to the idea):

his silver hairs
 Will purchase us a good opinion,
 And buy men's voices to commend our deeds.⁵³

Casca's and Metellus' assumption that what matters is how the conspiracy
 is seen by others is unconsciously echoed by Brutus a little later,
 immediately after he has urged the conspirators not to kill Caesar
 "wrathfully":

This shall make
 Our purpose necessary, and not envious;
 Which so appearing to the common eyes,
 We shall be call'd purgers, not murderers.

Of course, the fact that the murder "appear[s]" necessary "to the common
 eyes" does not "make" it so - any more than the fact that the murderers
 "seem to chide" their rage means that they are in fact Stoically
 passionless.⁵⁴ Brutus, temporarily, has lost sight of the distinction
 which he later sums up with passionate regret:

That every like is not the same, O Caesar,
 The heart of Brutus earns to think upon!⁵⁵

Shakespeare's Romans in Julius Caesar are fatally prone to overlook the difference between "like" and "the same," between public appearances and reality.

The most critical way in which opinion displaces knowledge in the play is the failure of self-knowledge. Shakespeare's Romans are more concerned with the way in which others perceive them than with examining their own feelings and moral awareness - a flaw which we have already seen in the Roman version of Stoic ethics, and which, as I have suggested throughout this thesis, is one to which Stoicism, in both its Senecan and Ciceronian forms, is inherently liable.

The problem is summed up most explicitly in a passage of oddly Socratic dialogue between Cassius and Brutus.

CASSIUS. ... Tell me, good Brutus, can you see your face?

BRUTUS. No, Cassius; for the eye sees not itself

But by reflection, by some other things.

CASSIUS. 'Tis just;

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 wish'd that noble Brutus had his eyes.⁵⁶

Cassius puts forward the proposition, and Brutus accepts, that it is impossible to see or judge yourself except as you are reflected in the eyes of others. The only true self-knowledge is gained through honour: the opinions that are held of you by those who are themselves honourable, that is, who are themselves regarded as virtuous in the opinions of others ("many of the best respect in Rome"). The sense of endless regression is underlined by Cassius' imagery, which echoes the discussions of honour by Cicero and later writers in the same tradition such as Du Vair. For Cicero, true honour is the accurate reflection of virtue, but false

honour, popular reputation, is a mere shadow. Cassius' word "shadow," which hovers between the two meanings ("reflection" is the dominant meaning, but the modern sense is unavoidably implied), suggests that the distinction is itself a somewhat shadowy one.⁵⁷ Brutus, in a flash of insight, objects

Into what dangers would you lead me, Cassius,
That you would have me seek into myself
For that which is not in me?⁵⁸

He has an uneasy sense that he is being led to see himself, and to act, in a way that is untrue to himself. Cassius brushes aside the question. His task is to induce Brutus to abandon his sense of himself, and accept instead the image reflected in Cassius' "glass": Brutus the tyrannicide, scion of a noble house, saviour of Rome. In the orchard scene we see that he has succeeded. Brutus' view of himself is now controlled by "the great opinion / That Rome holds of his name," as expressed in the cryptic (and, as we know, forged) letter which he "piece[s] out" by the light of "[t]he exhalations whizzing in the air." It would be hard to find a more suggestive image of the corruption of knowledge by false opinion.⁵⁹

Cassius tells Brutus,

no man here
But honours you; and every man doth wish
You had but that opinion of yourself
Which every noble Roman bears of you.⁶⁰

Their wish has been achieved. For the rest of the play Brutus devotes himself to acting out with constancy the role imposed upon him by the "opinion ... / Which every noble Roman bears" of him.

The failure in self-knowledge of Brutus, the play's most introspective character, is symptomatic of the nature of Shakespeare's Rome: a world in which "the eye sees not itself / But by reflection," and in which people

are governed by their sense of the opinions and expectations of others. It is not surprising that one of the play's recurring images is that of the theatre, with characters seen as performing for the critical judgement of others. Casca sees the offer of the crown to Caesar as a performance: "If the tag-rag people did not clap and hiss him, according as he pleas'd and displeas'd them, as they use to do the players in the theatre, I am no true man." Cassius and Brutus characteristically view their own actions from the outside when, after Caesar's murder, they imagine the "lofty scene" being "acted over" in future ages, and speculate how these future audiences will judge them.⁶¹

The most important of these theatrical images is of course Brutus' advice to the conspirators to emulate "our Roman actors" in playing their parts with "formal constancy." In Shakespeare's Rome, the ideal of constancy tends to take the form of consistency or Ciceronian decorum: the ideal of being always the same is expressed in the Ciceronian image of consistently playing a part. Because of the domination of Rome by opinion, however, this decorum is flawed and debased, and the playing of the role becomes disjoined from considerations of its truth or appropriateness to the actor.

[5] "A Roman's part": Ciceronian decorum

The peculiar quality of Roman constancy in Julius Caesar must, in my view, be seen as the result of the Roman mingling of Stoic constancy with Ciceronian decorum. Shakespeare's Romans seek to be "constant" by being consistent, maintaining fixed and stable identities. This is, however, the "formal constancy" of "Roman actors." Shakespeare's Romans take from Cicero's theatrical image not its explicit point - the necessity for

choosing appropriate roles - but its implications of externality and public performance. They lack self-knowledge, acting out roles which are based not upon their own personalities but upon the demands of public opinion. In thus falling short of Cicero's ideal, they nevertheless expose its inherent flaws: its emphasis upon public life, and its Roman conception of virtue something publicly displayed.

For Cicero, every human being has three personae or roles which he must play consistently, but the first two - the role of a human being, the role of himself as an individual - must take precedence over the third, the social role. For Shakespeare's Romans, however, the social role is primary. They are less concerned with "play[ing] the man well and duely" (in Montaigne's phrase), or with knowing themselves, than with being consistently Roman. Their main concern is to "be a Roman," to act "like a Roman," to play - in the words of Titinius just before his suicide - "a Roman's part."⁶²

For Shakespeare's Romans, however, even individual identity becomes a social role. "Brutus" or "Caesar," as much as "a Roman," is a role publicly defined by the expectations of others, a set of moral expectations that must be lived up to. This role is symbolised in the motif of names. When Cassius speaks of "the great opinion / That Rome has of [Brutus'] name," he brings together two ideas that are closely related. The "name" is the symbol of the persona, the aspect of a person perceived by public opinion, and hence the role the person must play.⁶³

We see this most clearly in the stylistic device which John W. Velz has usefully labelled "illeism": the habit of referring to oneself (or the person one is addressing) in the third person.⁶⁴ The idiom is used most often by Caesar ("Caesar is turned to hear," "Caesar shall go forth," "Shall Caesar send a lie?"), but also by Brutus, Cassius, Portia, Casca, and others.⁶⁵ The effect of illeism is to suggest the speaker looking at

himself from the outside and considering how his actions will be perceived by others. When Caesar says, "Caesar should be a beast without a heart, / If he should stay at home to-day for fear," the implication is that this is what others would say of him; his fear (as Decius realises) is of people saying, "Lo, Caesar is afraid." When Brutus urges Cassius to take his distant behaviour as meaning only "that poor Brutus, with himself at war, / Forgets the shows of love to other men," he is explicitly concerned with how others will interpret his actions.⁶⁶

In such cases the name has a normative force: it stands for an ideal self, defined by the expectations of others, which the speaker must consistently live up to. Caesar must be valiant, Brutus wise, Portia constant, in order to be themselves. "Shall Caesar send a lie?" implies that Caesar, being Caesar, cannot stoop to such an act. Portia tells Brutus that he is not acting like himself ("...I should not know you Brutus"), and, when he tries to attribute his odd behaviour to illness, replies unanswerably, "Brutus is wise, and, were he not in health, / He would embrace the means to come by it": almost by definition, Brutus cannot act as irrationally as he appears to be doing.⁶⁷

The relationship between person and name or persona is summed up most sharply by Caesar. Urged by Antony not to fear Cassius, he insists,

...I fear him not.
Yet if my name were liable to fear,
I do not know the man I should avoid
So soon as that spare Cassius.

He goes on to analyse shrewdly why Cassius is dangerous, yet ends with a repeated insistence that he does not fear:

I tell thee rather what is to be feared
Than what I fear; for always I am Caesar.⁶⁸

Caesar cannot admit to fearing anyone or anything, for his "name" is not "liable to fear": "Caesar," by definition, is fearless. For him to admit fear would be a breach of decorum, an act out of character. By asserting "always I am Caesar," Caesar is making the Stoic claim to be unus idemque, always the same. Yet this is not the same as saying, in any normal sense, "I am always true to myself," for Caesar is clearly denying his true feelings: the very earnestness of his denial betrays that he is afraid of Cassius. Rather the words mean "I must always play the role of Caesar." "Caesar" is a publicly assumed role, which Caesar the man must play with decorum and "formal constancy." The range of actions possible to him - and to Brutus and the others - is circumscribed by their roles and the expectations of others. To allow people to say, "Lo, Caesar is afraid," or "Brutus is foolish, or dishonest," would be a violation of decorum.

To assume such a persona is to see oneself from the outside, and, in a way, to avoid personal responsibility for one's own actions and motives. When Caesar announces what "Caesar" thinks or intends, he is not expressing his personal feelings but making statements about a public figure. His shifts in II.ii between third person ("Caesar shall forth") and first person ("I will stay at home") suggest the conflict between the fallible human being and the immutable public Caesar: "Caesar, in the first person, is troubled, but Caesar in the third person cannot admit it."⁶⁹ Similarly Brutus, while debating with himself over the murder, speaks of himself as "I"; having made the decision, he slips self-protectively into the third person:

O Rome, I make thee promise,
If the redress will follow, thou receivest⁷⁰
Thy full petition at the hand of Brutus!

He is seeing himself as "Rome" sees him, as a public figure, Brutus the liberator. By not saying "I will kill Caesar" he avoids confronting the

full personal meaning of his decision.

As we see here, the Roman ethic of Julius Caesar conforms in some ways, but not all, with Cicero's ideal of decorum. Shakespeare's Romans see themselves as actors and conceive of virtue as the consistent playing of a part; they are intensely concerned with consistency, aequabilitas, believing that "if ought bee comely, of trouth ther is nothing more seemely than an evennesse in all mans lyfe, and everye of his doinges...." They neglect, however, the rest of the sentence: "...which you can not 71 keepe, if you counterfette an others nature, and lette passe your owne." They lack self-knowledge, seeking instead to act artificial parts imposed on them by their society, the expectations of others, and their own moral aspirations. Casca is a semi-comic version of the theme: a man who seems a mask without a self, changing his personae (from "tardy form" to superstitious excitement to an imitation of Cassius' Stoic resolve) as readily as he changes his opinions. 72 Caesar, on the other hand, seems trapped in the rigidity of his heroic persona; we can fitfully perceive both human weakness and human warmth in him, but both are repressed in his attempts to maintain an inhuman consistency: "always I am Caesar." Portia, casting herself in the role of Brutus' wife and Cato's daughter, attempts to emulate their harsh masculine kind of virtue, one which violates her gentler nature and which she is fatally unable to sustain.

In Brutus the failure of self-knowledge is most obvious. The gentle, impractical philosopher tries to turn himself into a political leader and assassin, though he knows that he is not fitted for the role, and that Cassius is making him seek within himself for that which is not in him. He is drawn away from his true self by temptations which Cicero warns against: family traditions (the pressure to emulate his tyrannicidal ancestor), the influence of others (Cassius), the pressure of public opinion ("the great opinion / That Rome holds of his name"), and, most of

all, what Cicero singles out as the greatest enemy of true decorum: the desire to take up a role which seems in the abstract "grave" and noble, without considering whether he is fitted for it - "for neither is it to anye purpose to fight againste nature nor to ensue any thyng that ye can not atteine." The result is a "fight againste nature," which makes him increasingly unhappy, perturbed, and weary, until he chooses death as an escape from the strain.

The most successful characters in Julius Caesar are those who do not, like Cicero's Roman actors, play a single role, but consciously treat their roles as masks to be manipulated and discarded. Cassius can move easily from Machiavellian cynicism to an assumption (for Casca's benefit) of lofty Stoic resolution; Antony, who "loves ... plays," easily steps from the role of playboy to those of diplomat, demagogue, and general. Cassius and Antony are alike in deliberately playing with the idea of alternative roles ("If I were Brutus now and he were Cassius..."; "But were I Brutus, / And Brutus Antony...").⁷³ They are aware that roles are external and artificial, and (in Montaigne's words) "Of a vizard and apparence,⁷⁴ wee should not make a real essence." Though perhaps less admirable than Brutus, they are also less rigid, more aware of the complex possibilities of human nature. We will see, however, in Antony and Cleopatra, that Antony's easy exchanging of roles has its own dangers. In the long run the future belongs to Octavius Caesar, the man who never steps out of character, because, as far as we can see, there is no face behind his mask: man and role are totally identified.

The Roman ideal in Julius Caesar can be summed up in the familiar Stoic formula, to be "like oneself" - a phrase which sums up not only the ideal of Stoic constancy, to be always the same in all circumstances, but also the Roman version of decorum, of consistently playing the role of oneself. The phrase is used only once in the play, shortly before Brutus'

death. In the final section of this chapter I shall examine the scenes in which Brutus faces death and the way in which they sum up Shakespeare's view of constancy in Julius Caesar.

[6] "Like Brutus, like himself"

Death, as we have seen in dealing with the Stoic tradition, is the ultimate arena for constancy: the final test of the Stoic's ability to remain unmoved under pressure, and the finest opportunity to demonstrate his refusal to change and determination to remain himself to the end. In the final acts Brutus faces this test, first in receiving the news of his wife's death, and then in his own death by suicide. In these scenes we see most clearly Shakespeare's view of Roman constancy as a compound of Senecan Stoic constantia (the "untir'd spirit") and Ciceronian decorum ("formal constancy"), and the way in which both ideals blend moral idealism with conscious role-playing and pretence.

The quarrel scene in IV.iii shows Brutus at first at his most Stoically constant, refusing to shift from his moral position, to be moved by Cassius' pleas or anger, or to show any sign of emotion himself. His firmness of principle is admirable, but also cold, rigid, and self-righteous; we may respect his stand, but our human sympathy goes out to Cassius. At last, however, Brutus responds to Cassius' passionate protestation of love for him, forgives him, and even confesses that he was "ill-temper'd too" - a concession of human weakness which, coming from Brutus ("Do you confess so much?"), surprises and touches Cassius, and us. Then, unexpectedly, the trivial and ridiculous interruption of the poet rouses Brutus to an outburst of anger. When the interloper has been bundled out, Cassius expresses his surprise: "I did not think you could

have been so angry." Brutus vaguely refers to his "many griefs," and Cassius jocularly quotes textbook Stoicism back at him:

CASSIUS. Of your philosophy you make no use,
 If you give place to accidental evils.
 BRUTUS. No man bears sorrow better. Portia is dead.⁷⁵

The reply, which even at this moment blends a shade of Stoic pride with its grief, forces us to re-evaluate Brutus' behaviour throughout the scene: we now see his earlier coldness as the sign of a rigid control of his emotions, which, just maintained throughout the quarrel, was shattered when the poet caught him off his guard. It is the clearest illustration so far of Stoic constancy as suppression of feelings and concealment of suffering. It is illuminated, too, by what we now learn of the manner of Portia's death: having boasted of a "constancy" which we saw her unable to sustain, she has committed suicide out of "[i]mpatien[ce]" and "grief," and done so moreover by a method horribly appropriate for a Stoic who practiced suppression of emotions: swallowing fire.⁷⁶

After revealing his sorrow, Brutus clamps it down again: "Speak no more of her." This is not, however, the end of the matter. A few minutes later, in the council of war, Messala asks about Portia, Brutus conceals his knowledge, and Messala breaks the news to him.

BRUTUS. Now, as you are a Roman, tell me true.
 MESSALA. Then like a Roman bear the news I tell:
 For certain she is dead, and by strange manner.
 BRUTUS. Why, farewell, Portia. We must die, Messala.
 With meditating that she must die once,
 I have the patience to endure it now.
 MESSALA. Even so great men great losses should endure.
 CASSIUS. I have as much of this in art as you,
 But yet my nature could not bear it so.⁷⁷

The motives behind Brutus' lie are complex and obscure; primarily, however, he is giving a public exhibition of his constancy. By appearing

(falsely, as we know) completely unmoved by the news of his wife's death, he is putting Stoic philosophy into practice, and demonstrating how "great men great losses should endure" in a Senecan "example of constancy" for the admiring emulation of men like Messala. At the same time, he is maintaining decorum, behaving "like a Roman" and keeping up the behaviour which is expected of Brutus. Yet, to maintain these two ideals, he is forced to dissemble his true feelings and to tell an outright lie; to maintain "formal constancy" in the eyes of others, he betrays his principles of honesty. The ambiguity of Cassius' half-admiring, half-appalled comment hinges on the meaning of "art." Its primary, ostensible meaning is "The learning of the schools" (OED 3) - that is, "I am as well trained as you in Stoic ethical theory, but I couldn't bear to put it into practice like that." There is, however, a secondary meaning shared only between Cassius and Brutus: "Studied conduct or action ... artfulness" (OED 13) - "I thought I was a good hypocrite, but how can you bear to act at a moment like this?"

Many critics and editors, equally appalled, and unwilling to see Brutus as a hypocrite, have rejected this passage (with little or no textual justification) as a confusion produced by rewriting.⁷⁸ On the contrary, I regard it as central to Shakespeare's exploration of the nature of Roman constancy. Based on genuinely noble ideals, it nevertheless involves an unnatural suppression of human feelings ("art" in contrast with nature), and an "artful" dissimulation and pretence, both directed towards satisfying the opinions of others.

In the final act of Julius Caesar Brutus moves inexorably towards death by suicide. The idea is first raised in V.i, in a passage where (as I have shown earlier) Shakespeare deliberately heightens the contradictions he found in North's Plutarch. Asked by Cassius what he

will do if defeated, Brutus declares that "by the rule of [his] philosophy" suicide is a cowardly escape, and he would rather arm himself with Stoic patience and await the will of the gods. However, when Cassius, drawing the logical conclusion, asks if he is prepared to be led in triumph, he recoils:

No, Cassius, no. Think not, thou noble Roman,
That ever Brutus will go bound to Rome;
He bears too great a mind.⁷⁹

Brutus is inconsistent, yet the inconsistency is inherent in Stoic attitudes to suicide and in the word "constant" itself. In one sense, it is more "constant" to stay alive, whereas death is a form of running away; in another sense, there is nothing more "constant" and unmoving than a dead body. However, the illeism in these lines suggests that Brutus has slipped from Stoic theory to a concern for Roman decorum. Philosophy may claim that it is more constant to endure defeat, but as "Brutus" and a "noble Roman," he cannot endure such humiliation; to live on in defeat would be for him, as for Cato in Cicero's discussion, a violation of decorum. To preserve the integrity of his persona, he must die.

The theme of decorum is heavily stressed in the scenes which lead up to Brutus' death. Death and decorum are linked in Titinius' words, just before he kills himself: "This is a Roman's part." To act the "part" of a Roman involves dying rather than accepting shame.⁸⁰ Then, in V.iv, the idea of playing a part unto death is linked with an echoing insistence on the motif of names. Brutus and young Cato "proclaim [their] name[s] about the field," young Cato shouting "I am the son of Marcus Cato, ho!" until he is cut down and Lucilius pronounces his epitaph: "thou diest as bravely as Titinius, / And mayst be honour'd, being Cato's son."⁸¹ These Romans play the part of themselves to the end, and die in character. The scene ends with an actual impersonation, as Lucilius, to distract the enemy,

pretends to be Brutus and tries to persuade his captors to kill him. When his pretence is discovered, he tells Antony,

I dare assure thee that no enemy
 Shall ever take alive the noble Brutus.
 The gods defend him from so great a shame!
 When you do find him, or alive or dead,
 He will be found like Brutus, like himself.⁸²

The phrase, as we have seen throughout this thesis, is a traditional Stoic formula, meaning "He will act in a way worthy of his known virtue." The context, however, brings out its implications. The preceding episode of the proclaiming of names brings out the importance to Shakespeare's Romans of acting like themselves, living (and dying) up to their public reputations. Moreover, the fact that the speaker is Lucilius, who has just been acting "like Brutus" in the most literal sense, underlines the suggestion of acting and impersonation in the phrase. As much as Lucilius (Shakespeare implies), Brutus is acting "like Brutus," playing a role.⁸³

The death of Brutus, in V.v, brings together a Senecan Stoic suicide with the play's final development of the idea of decorum. Brutus kills himself on Stoic grounds:

Our enemies have beat us to the pit.
 It is more worthy to leap in ourselves
 Than tarry till they push us.

It is "more worthy" to accept the inevitable than to struggle vainly against it; by choosing your own time and manner of death you preserve your freedom and dignity to the end.⁸⁴ Yet there is also a sense that death is positively welcome:

Night hangs upon mine eyes; my bones would rest,
 That have but labour'd to attain this hour.

Behind these words lies the Stoic teleological fallacy: the whole purpose

of Brutus' life has been "but ... to attain this hour," to reach the "end" of death for which life is merely a preparation. Yet there is an underlying note of sad futility ("has my life merely come to this?") and a sense of relief that the labour is at last over. His dying words also suggest relief: "Caesar, now be still. / I killed thee not with half so good a will."⁸⁵ Whereas Brutus embarked on conspiracy, murder, and war out of a sense of duty, he welcomes his own death with genuine pleasure. The strain of living a life of Stoic virtue is at last over.

At the same time, Brutus is concerned to the end with honour and opinion. In the same breath as the Stoic sentiments I have just quoted, he boasts that he will "have glory by this losing day"; he is still thinking of his posthumous reputation. He is concerned to reassure himself that Strato, his servant, is "a fellow of a good respect" whose life has at least "some smatch of honour in it," so that the instrument of his death is not an unworthy one. After his death, Strato and Lucilius sum up:

MESSALA. Strato, where is thy master?

STRATO. Free from the bondage you are in, Messala.

The conquerors can but make a fire of him;

For Brutus only overcame himself,

And no man else hath honour by his death.

LUCILIUS. So Brutus should be found. I thank thee, Brutus,
That thou hast prov'd Lucilius' saying true.⁸⁶

This dialogue brings together the themes of constancy, decorum, honour, and death. Brutus' suicide has been the final proof of his Stoic constancy: by dying, he has asserted his freedom and his invulnerability to external evils. His spirit has gone free, leaving only his despised body to the conquerors. No man but himself has "honour by his death." Brutus has died for the sake of dignitas - to use Seneca's word, which means "honour," as Lodge translated it, but also moral integrity and

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 selfhood. By dying well he escapes the peril of an evil life, ensures that his enemies cannot force him to compromise or change, and remains himself to the end. Thus he preserves not only Stoic constancy but also decorum. Lucilius' "So Brutus should be found" recalls to us his earlier words: Brutus has been "found like Brutus, like himself." He has died in the way expected of him, consistent in character to the end.

Nevertheless, we cannot help remembering that Brutus' last words, a few moments earlier, expressed regret for his actions and relief at dying. At least since he took the decision to kill Caesar, if not for the whole of his Roman life, Brutus had been suffering the strain of playing a public role which was not natural or congenial to him. Brutus' death "like Brutus," just like Caesar's claim to be "always ... Caesar," does not mean that either man is being truly himself. Brutus has maintained to the end the role he was playing, and died in the way others expected of him. Roman opinion will honour him for dying "like himself" - but, as he himself said, every "like" is not the same.

Brutus' death scene embodies the complexity of "constancy" in Julius Caesar (though the word itself is not used). Brutus simultaneously fulfils the demands of Stoic ethics, remaining "constant as the northern star" in the face of defeat and death, and of Roman decorum, maintaining his "formal constancy" and playing his part consistently to the end. In both ways he has remained always the same, conquering mutability and attaining permanence through fame after his death. Both ideals, however, involve the strain of pretending to be something he is not, and concealing and suppressing his human weaknesses. It is not surprising that Brutus welcomes death. Only in death can he end the strain of pretence, and achieve in fact the condition he aspires to: absolute changelessness and immovability, a complete freedom of the mind from the body's weakness, and a complete identification between himself and his public role.

Ultimately, to play "a Roman's part" is to die.

In Julius Caesar Shakespeare draws upon the traditions of constancy which derive from Senecan Stoicism and from Cicero's decorum, and shows them as mingled together in the ethos of a society which values above all the ability to remain unmoving, unchanging, and self-consistent. Shakespeare's critique of the unnaturalness of Stoic virtue is quite traditional. More original is his demonstration that the flaw which vitiates Roman constancy is that which for the Stoics, and especially for the Neostoics, was its greatest enemy: the domination of opinion and the failure to distinguish appearances from realities. The element of acting in Roman decorum merely echoes the deeper pretence in the Stoic ideals of Brutus and Caesar: the pretence of being better than humanity. Whether or not Shakespeare had read Montaigne at the time he wrote Julius Caesar, the play's critique of constancy is very much in Montaigne's spirit. Absolute constancy, in either the Senecan or Ciceronian senses, is not natural to humanity; to claim to have attained it is to substitute acting and self-deception for self-knowledge, and to achieve, at great cost, a merely "formal constancy."

In Julius Caesar the Senecan and Ciceronian strains of constancy are so intermingled that a distinction between them, such as I have here attempted to draw, can only be artificial. In Coriolanus, however, Shakespeare investigates more deeply the relationship between a constant Roman hero and his society, and shows how the heroic individualism of Senecan constancy can come into conflict with the social demands of Roman decorum.

CHAPTER NINE

"I PLAY THE MAN I AM":

CORIOLANUS

Coriolanus, unlike Julius Caesar, has not commonly been interpreted as a play about constancy. This is not surprising, for neither the play's ancient Rome nor its passionate traitor-hero seem to have much in common with Stoicism or the kind of Stoic constancy represented by Brutus. Nevertheless (in a paradox characteristic of this intensely paradoxical play), Coriolanus, more than any other Shakespearian character, embodies the virtue of constancy in its strengths and weaknesses.

By focusing on the relationship between Coriolanus and his Rome, Shakespeare is able to explore more deeply than in Julius Caesar the contradictions within the ideal of constancy, and to show what happens when the ideal is pushed to its limits. Coriolanus is a Senecan figure, heroically immovable and passionately dedicated to integrity of self, who arises out of a society which (though it uses the language of Stoic heroism) is fundamentally concerned with Ciceronian decorum and social utility. Rome has shaped Coriolanus to perform with decorum his role as the heroic warrior. For Coriolanus, however, the role has become his "nature" and identity, and he practices it with such absolute consistency and such an uncompromising refusal to adapt to circumstances that Rome is forced to cast him out. In his exile, he takes the principles of Roman constancy to their logical conclusion, striving to become an immovable

Senecan god-hero. In the end, however, his constancy is overcome as he is forced to acknowledge the basic Stoic principle which he and Rome have neglected: constancy must involve consistency with nature, and it is impossible to be constant to one's own nature while being in conflict with "Great nature."²

[1] The constancy of Coriolanus

Reminded in the opening scene of the play of his "former promise" to fight in the Volscian war, Caius Marcius (later Coriolanus) replies, "I am constant."³ He means, primarily, "I will keep my promise," but the phrase has wider reverberations. It may be taken as the keynote of his character.

Of course, Coriolanus is very different from the conventional image of the constant man, such as Brutus in Julius Caesar. He seems, in Bradley's phrase, to have "not a drop of stoic blood in his veins"; he is not rational, unemotional and self-controlled, but a passionate, violent warrior.⁴ Plutarch (as I have argued) clearly implies this contrast between the constant Brutus and the obstinate Coriolanus, to the latter's disadvantage: Coriolanus shows a kind of "constancy" (apatheia) in his endurance of pain and hardship and his indifference to money and pleasure, but this is vitiated by his irrational obstinacy, anger, and belligerence. Yet Plutarch also implies that these virtues and faults are linked in Coriolanus' moral code: he is a man who "never yielded," believing that "to overcome always ... was a token of magnanimity."⁵ Shakespeare, drawing on this hint, sees Coriolanus' strengths and weaknesses as related to an ideal of constancy, of being always the same, or, in Aufidius' words, "Not to be other than one thing."⁶

This ideal of constancy is for Shakespeare a distinctively Roman one. The differences between the way it is manifested in Coriolanus and in Brutus are partly a matter of historical development. The Rome of Coriolanus, as Plutarch makes clear, is centuries earlier than that of Julius Caesar, and more primitive. In this society "constancy" is a simple heroic code, made up of the warrior virtues which the Romans called virtus and fides: the courage to stand fast in battle, the honour which tells the truth and keeps its word. These simple concepts will develop, over time, into the more complex, self-conscious, philosophical virtue of a Brutus, for whom steadfastness has become a matter of not being "moved" by emotion. The basic Roman values of steadfastness and consistency, however, remain the same.

The constancy of Coriolanus may be analysed into these two basic virtues. The more obvious is virtus, courage and steadfastness in battle, often embodied in the image (verbal or visual) of Coriolanus standing fast while others run away. He despises those who "budge" in the face of the enemy, contemptuously refers to his cowardly followers as "these movers," and challenges Aufidius: "Let the first budger die the other's slave, /
And the gods doom him after!"⁷ Cominius' great eulogy in II.ii presents him as an irresistible natural force in battle, not only immovable in himself but inspiring constancy in others: "He stopp'd the fliers...." His almost inhuman insensibility to wounds and pain recalls the Senecan image of the invulnerable sapiens, or of the iron-skinned Hercules in Hercules Oetaeus.⁸ He transcends bodily weaknesses by the heroic strength of his "untir'd spirit" (in Brutus' phrase): "his doubled spirit / Requick'ned what in flesh was fatigate." His indifference to pain is only equalled by his indifference to worldly goods: "Our spoils he kick'd at...."⁹ These qualities are present in Plutarch's Martius, but Shakespeare surrounds him with the aura of the Senecan Stoic hero, and suggests

that his heroism arises from Volumnia's Stoic "precepts":

You were used
 To say extremities was the trier of spirits;
 That common chances common men could bear;....
 You were us'd to load me
 With precepts that would make invincible
 The heart that conn'd them.

His prayer for his son -

 that thou mayst prove
 To shame invulnerable, and stick i'th' wars
 Like a great sea-mark, standing every flaw,
 And saving those that eye thee -

expresses the ideal of Stoic constancy in its noblest form: the immovability of the Stoic hero, like that of a lighthouse, serves as an "example of constancy" which guides others to safety.¹⁰

The other aspect of Coriolanus' constancy is consistency. This is partly a Roman insistence on fides, being "constant" to one's "former promise"; the most damning insult Coriolanus can throw at Aufidius is "I do hate thee / Worse than a promise-breaker."¹¹ More fundamentally, it is a determination to remain consistently true to the same beliefs and moral values. Coriolanus despises the "many-headed multitude," "the mutable, rank-scented meiny," largely for their inconstancy; his tirade in the opening scene is aimed at their fickleness and unreliability:

 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. ...
 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.¹²

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He sees the plebeians as the embodiment of inconstant opinion. In

attacking them he defines his own central value: consistency in standing by his fixed beliefs and principles. He is no more willing to change or compromise his views than to run away from an enemy in battle. In the political conflicts of Act III he insists upon the consistency of his position - "This was my speech, and I will speak't again"; he cannot accept that he should modify his views for the sake of tact or timing, and is outraged when Menenius tries to suggest that he has overstated them out of "choler": "Were I as patient as the midnight sleep, / By Jove, 'twould
¹⁴
 be my mind!" Behind the insistence on intellectual consistency is an ideal of reliability. Coriolanus is proud that everyone knows what to expect from him, and that he is seen to be always the same.

Aufidius, in his strange, convoluted analysis of Coriolanus in IV.vii, suggests that constancy (consistency), as much as pride or lack of judgement, may be the key to his character and his tragedy. He is proud, but "his nature / In that's no changeling," and, as the sympathetic Second Citizen remarked in the first scene, "What he cannot help in his nature" it is useless to "account a vice in him." It is his "nature" to be the same under all circumstances:

Not 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 controll'd the war.
¹⁵

In the Senecan formula, Coriolanus is unus idemque inter diversa. As Aufidius suggests, this is both a virtue and a flaw, a strength and a weakness. Coriolanus' heroic steadfastness is the source of his greatness as a warrior, and his integrity seems admirable by contrast with the shabby intrigues of the tribunes and Aufidius, and even the unscrupulous pragmatism of Volumnia and Menenius. On the other hand, his rigidity - his refusal to adapt himself to different circumstances and determination

to behave in politics exactly as he does on the battlefield - is disastrous, and his predictability makes him vulnerable both to manipulation and to ridicule. His repeated knee-jerk response to the charge of "traitor," which both the tribunes and Aufidius exploit, makes him seem mechanically predictable, a puppet rather than a man with free will. Such predictability is comic. The constant tragic hero at times seems uncomfortably like a Jonsonian "humour" character, "speaking his speech again" like the pub bore, locked into a comically obsessive pattern of behaviour.¹⁶

The constancy of Coriolanus thus combines steadfastness and consistency, and may be interpreted in the light of either of the traditions of constancy which I have associated respectively with these two definitions of the word. On the one hand, despite his un-Stoic passion and violence, he has the rocklike and godlike strength, the fearless steadfastness, the self-sufficiency and superiority to ordinary mankind of the Senecan Stoic hero; even more, he resembles Seneca's Hercules, that literal translation of the metaphorical virtues of the sapiens, in his superhuman strength and invulnerability. He has the Senecan concern for integrity of self and willingness to die rather than do something unworthy of himself. On the other hand, this concern for selfhood may also be interpreted as a form of decorum. As Coriolanus himself puts it in an epigrammatic summing-up of the meaning of Ciceronian decorum,¹⁷ "I play / The man I am."

These contradictions are inherent not only in Coriolanus but in Rome and its concept of virtue. The "nature" which makes Coriolanus constant, and which he strives to be constant to, is not simply that which he was born with but (just as much) that which Rome has created in him. To understand Coriolanus' constancy, therefore, we must now look at the Roman idea of virtue and its relationship to the nature, or role, of Coriolanus.

[2] Roman virtue: virtus and honour

The ideal of virtue which Coriolanus pursues - constancy, steadfast courage, honour and integrity - is that of his Rome. Through the concept of Roman virtue in Coriolanus, however, there runs a contradiction between an official ideal of individual heroic virtue, and an unstated assumption that such individual virtue must be subordinated to the needs of the state, and defined and validated by Roman opinion in the form of the conferring and receiving of honour.

Roman virtue in Coriolanus is virtus: manly courage. This is made explicit by Cominius at the start of his eulogy of Coriolanus:

It is held
That valour is the chiefest virtue and
Most dignifies the haver.¹⁸

Shakespeare is putting into the mouth of Rome's spokesman Plutarch's observation that in early Rome "valiantnes was honoured ... above all other vertues," and that the Latin word virtus (manliness) means both courage and virtue in general. Coriolanus, calling for volunteers during the war, sums up its elements: love of blood, love of country, desire for a "brave death" and for honour and glory ("if any fear / Lesser his person than an ill report....").¹⁹ Volumnia, describing to Virgilia the principles on which she brought up her son, makes clear the dominance of warlike courage and desire for glory over all other values: in the name of virtus Coriolanus was sent to war till he "proved himself a man," and if he had died then "his good report should have been my son." This is a harsh morality, which values the heroic "masculine" virtues of courage, strength, and endurance almost to the exclusion of the "feminine" qualities of love, pity, and sensitivity. Its unnatural quality is

clearly seen when Volumnia describes a bleeding wound as lovelier than a mother's breast, and when a little boy's wanton destruction of a butterfly elicits only the admiring comment " 'tis a noble child."²⁰

"Noble" is, in fact, a key word in the Roman vocabulary; it and its cognates occur 85 times in the play, and are insistently associated with the hero, from his first acclamation as "noble Martius!" to the promise in the final lines that "he shall have a noble memory."²¹ This is an aristocratic ethic, belonging to the patrician class of Rome, "the honour'd number, / Who lack not virtue." It is not, therefore, intrinsically public-spirited: it is directed ~~towards~~²² towards individual heroic achievement - to do great deeds, to "exceed the common," to achieve honour and glory - rather than towards the service of the state and the community. The Roman ethic of nobility resembles the Senecan ideal of the Stoic hero (however unlike in other ways) in being concerned primarily with the self-assertion and self-perfection of the heroic individual. Both ideals are potentially anti-social.

The problem is that which Cicero analyses in his discussion in De officiis I of the virtue of magnitudo animi - a virtue which, while it refers primarily to warlike courage, also carries overtones of the Stoic ideal of absolute constancy and integrity. From such "greatnesse of corage," and the Stoic principles which necessarily underlie it, arise great "profite," utilitatem, for society. Yet it is also dangerous unless it is controlled by more social virtues. It may lead those who pursue it into a "wifulnesse ... and an overseking of rule" which can lead them to destroy themselves and (worse) the state.²³ Rome faces this danger, when its ideal man and exemplar of virtue is Coriolanus, the solitary arrogant superman who is characteristically "himself alone, / To answer all the city."²⁴

The Roman ethic of nobility, however, has other tendencies which

counter this anti-social individualism. The very fact that it is based upon "nobility" means that it is tied to social values. To be "noble" is to live up to the values and norms of the Roman noble class. Like the ideal of being "Roman" in Julius Caesar, the ideal of "nobility" depends upon the standards of a particular society or class, and hence upon the judgements and opinions passed by members of that group on one another. These judgements are exercised through the social convention of "honour" - a central theme of the play which has been sensitively analysed by critics such as D. J. Gordon, Norman Rabkin, Katherine Stockholder, and J. L.

²⁵ Simmons. The desire for honour is the mainspring of Roman virtue: Volumnia makes this very clear in her first scene, as the word and its synonyms echo: "honour," "renown," "fame," "good report."²⁶ Rome's men do great deeds on behalf of Rome, and Rome rewards them with honour (praise, glory) and honours (offices and tributes). Through this process of conferring and receiving honour, the individualistic pursuit of "nobility" or magnitudo animi is tied to the service and needs of the Roman state.

This dependence upon honour means, however, that Rome's morality rests upon "opinion." In Coriolanus as in Julius Caesar, a good Roman (in the eyes of Rome) is one who acts for the sake of the opinions of others, and to be virtuous means to be seen and said to be virtuous. Virtue does not truly exist unless it is publicly recognised. So, when Coriolanus refuses honours, Cominius jokingly threatens to put him in manacles "[l]ike one that means his proper harm," for to refuse to have his deeds honoured and validated by public opinion is to deny their existence and suicidally destroy his own identity. Coriolanus, however, instead of being rewarded with honours and praise,²⁷ "pays himself with being proud." For him virtue (and indeed honour) has nothing to do with the opinions of others; like the Stoic sapiens, he is guided not by opinion but by what he knows to be right, following constantly his own sense of personal integrity. At

least, that is his view. In the course of the play, however, he is appalled to realise that for Rome his virtue is indeed defined by the opinions of others - which means, in the final analysis, by those embodiments of mere opinion, the fickle and inconstant plebeians - and that he must flatter them to buy their "voices" to validate his honours. The Roman concept of virtue, which for him has been absolute truth, is for Rome merely based upon opinion. In this play as in Julius Caesar, Roman virtue is a social construct: for Rome "our virtues / Lie in
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 th'interpretation of the time." Its most basic axiom is merely an agreed assumption, a Roman opinion: "It is held / That valour is the chiefest virtue...."

The paradox of Roman virtue in Coriolanus is its intermingling of the Senecan and Ciceronian concepts of virtue and constancy. While Rome exalts an ideal of heroically aspiring individual virtue, it at the same time tries to tie this heroic ideal to the service of the state by making it dependent upon the giving and receiving of honour. In the process it becomes clear that the ideals of Roman virtue are social constructs, governed by opinion, and that virtue in Rome is the playing of a social role. Coriolanus painfully discovers this paradox. Created by Rome as the embodiment of Roman virtue, and believing absolutely in Rome's ideals, he discovers that, while he sees himself as pursuing an ideal of constancy, Rome sees him simply as playing a social role with decorum - not as a Senecan "untir'd spirit," but simply as one who plays his part with "formal constancy." This conflict is at the centre of Coriolanus' conflict with Rome.

[3] Rome and the identity of Coriolanus

Coriolanus is the creation of Rome and the embodiment of Roman virtue. His "nature" is the product of Roman nurture, rather than of nature itself. This, as J. L. Simmons has pointed out, is Shakespeare's crucial and paradoxical departure from Plutarch's conception: "Shakespeare, with grim irony, urges Coriolanus not as a victim of neglect but as the epitome of Roman cultivation."²⁹ Cominius, in his eulogy in the Senate, presents Coriolanus as the unique embodiment of Roman virtus. It is held in Rome that valour is the chiefest virtue; "If it be, / The man I speak of cannot in the world / Be singly counterpois'd."³⁰ If Rome's conception of virtue is correct, then Coriolanus is the perfect man. Cominius goes on to paint a picture of Coriolanus as an irresistible war machine, "a thing of blood" whose sword mows down his opponents, before whom men give way like water-weed before a ship. The imagery recalls a passage earlier in the play:

you may as well
Strike at the heaven with your staves as lift them
Against the Roman state; whose course will on
The way it takes, cracking ten thousand curbs
Of more strong link asunder than can ever
Appear in your impediment.³¹

The patricians of Rome see Coriolanus as an analogue to their vision of "the Roman state": iron-hard, tireless and pitiless, invulnerable, omnipotent, and godlike - as remote from being harmed by human opposition as "the heaven," or (to quote Seneca's description of the wise man)³² "impregnable like the nature of the gods."

The extent to which Coriolanus is the product of his society and environment is made very clear in Volumnia's account of his upbringing in I.iii. In none of Shakespeare's other tragedies are we given such an

explicit account of the process by which the hero's character was formed. We hear the "precepts" with which Volumnia used to "load" her son, and of the moral pressures which she placed on him to conform to her ideal of warlike prowess and desire for glory. Coriolanus, it seems, could hardly have become other than the man he is. Volumnia speaks no more than the truth when she claims that "My praises made thee first a soldier," and when he later tells him, "Thou art my warrior; / I help to frame thee," she clearly refers not just to her physical but also her psychological and social "framing" of him. This is not merely a personal influence; the play is not simply or primarily about the relationship between mother and son. Volumnia is also the embodiment of patrician Rome - as she implies in an oddly suggestive line: "I am in this / Your wife, your son, these senators, the nobles...." Through Volumnia, Rome makes Coriolanus. Coriolanus is the most deterministic of Shakespeare's tragedies in its stress on the inescapable moulding influence of environment and upbringing - as Antony and Cleopatra, with its sense of the fluidity of human character, is the least so. There is a tragic irony in Coriolanus' desire, in the last act, to "stand / As if a man were author of himself": more than most men, he is the creation of others, and bound by the self which his society has created for him.

This social determinism is brilliantly symbolised by the fact that the hero's very name is given to him by Rome. Seizing upon an episode in Plutarch, Shakespeare extends his use in Julius Caesar of names as symbols of the public self; the name by which the hero is known, "Coriolanus," is not his birth-name, but is given to him as one of his war honours. He, who refuses other honours as degrading and irrelevant, accepts this one, though in doing so he is letting not merely his actions but his very identity be defined by the opinions of others. When he is banished from Rome he loses this name and this identity, becoming "a kind of nothing,

titleless" once divorced from his defining society.

There is clearly a contradiction here between two ways in which we see the relationship between Rome and Coriolanus. On the one hand, he is the embodiment of heroic virtus and nobility, a human analogue of the all-powerful Roman state, a potentially superhuman and godlike figure. On the other hand, he is the product of a Roman upbringing, moulded by his mother and his class into Rome's warrior servant, given his rank, his honours, his name and his identity by Rome. On the one hand he towers above normal humanity; on the other he is tied to and defined by his society. This contradiction is reflected in the two ways of looking at Coriolanus' constancy. On the one hand, he is a Senecan figure, pursuing an ideal of absolute constancy and integrity of self, and aspiring to rise above humanity to godlike stature. On the other hand, he can be seen as a figure of Ciceronian decorum, playing a social role for the sake of the opinions of others. In the central scenes of the play, Coriolanus comes to the realisation that, while he sees himself in the former way, Rome fundamentally sees him in the latter. The conflict may be expressed in the question whether Coriolanus is being true to himself, or playing a role.

Rome sees Coriolanus as playing a role: the role of the heroic Roman warrior in which it has cast him by his upbringing. An image in Cominius' eulogy - "When he might act the woman in the scene, / He prov'd best man i'th' field...." - suggests that the battlefield is itself a kind of "scene" or stage, and Coriolanus has simply chosen a different kind of

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 role. The patricians admire him for the consistent decorum with which he plays his role, but feel that he carries it too far, and should be prepared to play a different part if necessary. So Volumnia asks him,

as thou hast said
 My praises made thee first a soldier, so,

To have my praise for this, perform a part
 Thou hast not done before.³⁸

A soldier is one part, a politician (or liar and flatterer) is another, and Coriolanus must be prepared to change from one part to another. Coriolanus cannot see it in this way. For him, being a soldier and following the code of Roman virtus is not a "part"; it is his "nature" and his very identity. His ideal is one of constancy and truth to himself: to be always the same, "not to be other than one thing." Acting is hypocrisy, a contemptible betrayal of the truth.

This conflict of views surfaces when Coriolanus is called upon to perform for the people: first to ask for their votes, then for their forgiveness after the street battle. The task of electioneering is for him "a part / That I shall blush in acting." He must stand up like an actor on the stage, wearing a ridiculous costume, to recite his deeds ("`Thus I did, and thus!`"), show his scars like stage props, put on a public performance to be applauded or booed by an audience of the plebeians he despises. It is not merely a humiliation, but a traumatic insight into the nature of his role as Rome sees it. This is what he has done his deeds for:

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 voices³⁹ have
 Done many things, some less, some more.

His whole life has been a performance designed merely to win applause from others, his heroic pursuit of constancy merely the decorous acting of a part. For Coriolanus, however, the deeds and the ideals have been real. He may have been acting, but the part he has been performing is his true self.

Coriolanus tries to express this insight in some crucial lines during the argument with Volumnia:

Why did you wish me milder? Would you have me
False to my nature? Rather say I play
The man I am.⁴⁰

The final phrase is a brilliant summing-up of the paradox of Ciceronian decorum: an ideal which depends upon self-knowledge and truth to oneself, but also upon a striving for self-consistency which entails consciously acting the part of oneself. More specifically, Coriolanus is fumbling to express the paradox of his own situation, a paradox he can only suggest by simultaneously admitting and denying that he is an actor. His self, "[t]he man I am," is the creation of Rome, which has formed and moulded him; his "nature" is the product of Roman nurture. In the pragmatic eyes of Rome, it is a part in which he has been cast. For Coriolanus, however, the role has become his nature and his identity.⁴¹ He cannot, as Volumnia casually suggests, change temporarily from the role of soldier to a different role; the role is himself, and he has no identity separate from it, no "self" different from the persona perceived by Rome.

In this he differs from the role-players of Julius Caesar, Caesar, Brutus, and the rest, in whom, despite their efforts, there was a clear and painful gap between the public persona and the private self. In Coriolanus the two are identical. Nevertheless, "I play / The man I am" does not mean simply and tautologically "I am myself." Volumnia, in her impatient response, "You might have been enough the man you are / With striving less to be so," misses the point of what her son is saying. Coriolanus is being himself, but also (as he now realises) consciously "striving" to "play" himself, to remain true to his ideal of constancy and self-consistency. He must not, even for a moment, lapse into playing a different part,

Lest I surcease to honour mine own truth,
 And by my body's action teach my mind
 A most inherent baseness.⁴²

Thus Coriolanus, the man who despises acting, is forced to define his own moral code in terms of theatrical decorum. He has found a part which is utterly appropriate to himself, identified himself totally with it, and plays it with such unalterable consistency that he cannot, even for a moment, break out of it.

Cicero, however, though he stresses the fundamental importance of appropriateness and consistency, aequabilitas, also insists that these qualities must be moderated by a sense of what is socially necessary and possible. We should play the part which is appropriate for us, but if circumstances force us to play one which is not appropriate, to violate decorum, then "all care ... must be employed: that, if we do them not comlye, yet wyth as lyttle uncomlynnesse as may be...." Decorum as a social virtue depends on such adaptability. Coriolanus, identifying himself entirely with his part, turns (in Montaigne's words) a "vizard and apparence" into a "real essence," and is quite unable to play a different role.⁴³ He endows decorum with the heroic absoluteness of Senecan constancy. From his development of decorum it is possible to see how scholars like Spens and Haydn could derive from De officiis the concept of "bastard Stoicism" and the individualistic hero-villains of Elizabethan drama. "I play / The man I am" can become a formula for the pursuit of absolute selfhood.⁴⁴ This is, however, a perversion of Cicero's doctrine - as the end of the play will remind us.

Though Coriolanus does finally agree to play the indecorous part, his performance is predictably a failure. He cannot help but act like himself, as the tribunes know, and they are easily able to rig the performance and manipulate him into saying the words that will give them

cause to banish him. However, the attempt has its tragic consequences. It is not that, as Coriolanus fears, the momentary relaxing of his constancy will cause him to become untrue to his "own truth" and lapse into "baseness." Rather he fully realises, for the first time, that what he is pursuing really is "mine own truth" rather than Rome's: that, although Rome has taught him the ideals of virtus and constancy, only he really believes in them as moral absolutes rather than as a matter of appearance, opinion, and decorous performance. Banished, he retorts, "I banish you."⁴⁵ He goes out of Rome in pursuit of his own truth, to carry the ideal of constancy as far as it can go, divorced from the society which created it and him.

The conflict between Coriolanus and Rome in these acts may, as I have suggested, be interpreted in the light of Cicero's discussion of magnitudo animi: the Senecan pursuit of personal greatness, constancy and integrity of self can be dangerous and destructive if it is not harnessed to the good of society as a whole. Shakespeare, however, explores the problem more deeply and with an awareness of the ironies of the case. Heroic constancy is the essence of Rome's official morality, of which Coriolanus is the perfect product and embodiment. He practices Roman virtue too constantly, plays his role too consistently, takes Rome's opinions as "mine own truth." He is not only noble but "too noble," and the Rome⁴⁶ which created him is forced to cast him out.

[4] "Some other deity than nature": Coriolanus outside Rome

In the first three acts, Shakespeare has explored the relationship between the constant hero and his society; in the last two acts, he shows

chaos of meaningless chance and mutability, in which human motives and moral principles change as irrationally as anything else. The Roman code of steadfastness and constancy in Coriolanus, like the Stoic constancy and social decorum of Julius Caesar, is a way of imposing stability on human behaviour. Such constancy, as Coriolanus discovered, is artificial, resting on opinion and pretence. Outside Rome and its morality, however, he finds nothing constant at all.

Yet this loss of identity and stability does not mean that Coriolanus abandons the ideal of constancy. On the contrary, he becomes even more rigidly constant. Leaving Rome, he assured his friends that they would hear from him, "and never of me aught / But what is like me formerly."⁵⁰ It is paradoxically true, although when they next hear of him he is leading an army against them. In a morally chaotic world, he does not himself become vacillating or changeable, but determines to be even more absolutely true to himself - the hard, inflexible nature that Rome has forged in him - and to pursue his new course with immovable resolution.

Coriolanus' moral position in these final acts may be compared to the "sceptical constancy" of Pyrrho in Montaigne's essay "Of Vertue": the determination, in an irrational and absurd world, to stick with absolute rigidity to one's chosen course, and, since absolute truth is unknowable, to be absolutely consistent with one's "own truth." I have already suggested that such a scepticism underlies the Roman ideal of constancy. Romans must be constant to the values which are defined as "Roman" or "noble," though these are based only upon Roman opinion. Caesar (or Brutus) must be immovably constant and consistent, because to change his mind would be to acknowledge that his decisions are arbitrary rather than based on immutable moral certainty. In Coriolanus, clinging to his constancy as the one reliable thing amid the world's "slippery turns," we see much more clearly the scepticism and indeed the desperation which can

underlie such a will to be immovable. He has something of the mingled nobility and absurdity of Montaigne's Pyrrho, capable of heroic endurance of suffering but also ridiculous in his determination to walk into ditches rather than modify his course to avoid them.⁵¹

Coriolanus, as he marches on Rome, is governed by an inflexible resolution and a determination to be immovable by arguments or pleas. Shakespeare plays, as in Julius Caesar, with the various senses of being "moved." Menenius, who tells Coriolanus that he was "moved to come to thee ... being assured none but myself could move thee," is repelled by his rocklike resolve, and bitterly reports to the tribunes that they are as likely to move Coriolanus as to displace "yond coign o'th' Capitol, yond corner-stone with your little finger." Aufidius comments on the rejection of Menenius, "You keep a constant temper." The guards also pay tribute to his constancy with a Senecan image: "The worthy fellow is our general; he's the rock, the oak not to be wind-shaken."⁵² Coriolanus is as constant as Brutus in refusing to be moved by personal friendships and insisting that "affections" must be subordinated to "reason," or as Caesar when in his Olympian constancy he declared that he could not be moved by the pleas of lesser mortals.

Coriolanus is thus practising a form of the Senecan Stoic virtue of constancy. It is, of course, a strange and in some ways perverted form. Plutarch insists on this, stressing that Coriolanus' resolution and patience result not from rational self-control but from a numbing excess of anger and pain. Shakespeare, too, makes it clear that Coriolanus is no more passionless than he was in the earlier acts, that pride and anger are the mainspring of his desire for revenge, and that it is these, rather than reason and principle, which make him immovable: "his injury [is] / The gaoler to his pity."⁵³

Yet the vice of obstinacy is not as easily separable from the virtue

of constancy as Plutarch would suggest. Coriolanus' rigidity is in many ways indistinguishable from the Stoic virtue; if it is hard, unfeeling, and rigid, so too is the virtue of Seneca's sapiens. And if it arises out of passion rather than reason, is that also so great a difference? Shakespeare has already suggested in Julius Caesar (what many previous Christian critics of Stoicism had suggested) that the emotion of pride may lie behind much Stoic constancy. Montaigne, with more original insight, suggested in "Of Drunkenness" and elsewhere that constancy, though traditionally associated with reason and self-control, is in fact a kind of heroic madness, attainable only in brief moments of overmastering emotion. This is the kind of constancy we find in Seneca's Hercules, and in later "Herculean heroes" (in Eugene Waith's term) such as Coriolanus - figures who have many of the attributes of Stoic heroism, without the passionless tranquillity which in Stoic theory is essential to constancy.

Coriolanus most strikingly resembles Seneca's Stoic hero in his aspiration to be like a god. Earlier in the play the tribune Junius Brutus accused him:

You speak o'th' people
As if you were a god, to punish; not
A man of their infirmity. (III.i.80-82)

Now that he has broken away from Rome and its people, this description becomes increasingly accurate. Coriolanus strives, in his mother's words, "[t]o imitate the graces of the gods." He aspires to rise above humanity, cutting himself off from all his human ties, and to "stand / As if a man were author of himself / And knew no other kin"; to be like a god, remote, immovable, untouchable, indifferent to human concerns, except "to punish" evildoing humanity. Menenius comments that "He wants nothing of a god but eternity, and a heaven to throne in" - echoing, as I have noted earlier, the Senecan aphorism that "a good man onely differeth from God but in

time." Sicinius notes another qualification: he lacks mercy.

Menenius' description, however, has other, less godlike overtones:

This Marcius is grown from man to dragon; he has wings, he's more than a creeping thing. ...he no more remembers his mother now than an eight-year-old horse. The tartness of his face sours ripe grapes; when he walks, he moves like an engine and the ground shrinks before his treading. He is able to pierce a corslet with his eye, talks like a knell, and his hum is a battery. He sits in his state like a thing made for Alexander.⁵⁵

Menenius sees Coriolanus not only as a god, but also as an animal, a machine, a statue, a "thing." In rejecting his own humanity he has become more than human but also less than human. To use Seneca's images, he is not only a god but also a "rock," a thing too hard and insensible to feel pain or tenderness. He has achieved not only the superhumanity of the Stoic sapiens but also the inhuman or subhuman insensibility and pitilessness which the opponents of Stoicism attributed to him. This is the paradox implicit in much debate about the Stoic ideal, most memorably stated by Montaigne: when men attempt to "escape man," "insteade of transforming themselves into Angels, they transchange themselves into beastes: in lieu of advancing, they abase themselves."⁵⁶ Coriolanus' constancy in these final acts is magnificent if regarded like a natural force; in human terms, it is appalling. In achieving absolute constancy⁵⁷ he has deprived himself of humanity.

Both the references to Coriolanus as god and as beast or thing pick up images in the earlier part of the play. When Sicinius wonders at how he has changed - "Is't possible that so short a time can alter the condition of a man?" - Menenius replies that he is merely developing his latent potential: "There is differency between a grub and a butterfly; yet your butterfly was a grub."⁵⁸ Even when he was the servant of Rome, Coriolanus showed signs both of superhumanity and subhumanity; Cominius' eulogy

showed him as a figure both of superhuman courage and power and inhuman, mechanical destructiveness. Now there is a suggestion that in developing both to the destruction of his humanity, he is fulfilling the values which Rome has taught him. He is taking to its logical conclusion the Roman heroic warrior ethic of "nobility" and the axiom that "valour is the chiefest virtue," but also the inhumanity of that code which rejoiced in war and death, thought the bleeding wound lovelier than the mother's breast, and saw nobility in the destruction of a butterfly. Cominius says that Coriolanus is a "god" to the Volscians, and

leads them like a thing
Made by some other deity than Nature,
That shapes man better....

What has "made" Coriolanus but Rome? It is not, I think, merely fanciful to suggest that the "other deity than Nature" is Rome, which attempts to reshape men according to its own vision of virtue and so make them better than Nature created them - but at the cost of making them, in some ways, worse.⁵⁹ The controlling irony of these final acts of Coriolanus is that the hero is setting out to destroy Rome in the name of the official morality which Rome has taught him, because he is the man that Rome has "made" and "shaped" him to be.

Coriolanus, having lost the name which Rome gave him, proposes to forge himself a new name in the fires of burning Rome. Kenneth Burke has brilliantly pointed out that, if he gained the name "Coriolanus" by sacking Corioles, the name he would forge in the fires of Rome would have to be "Romanus."⁶⁰ Whether or not Shakespeare consciously intended this implication, it sums up one of the central paradoxes of the play: that Coriolanus will fulfil his role as the perfect Roman by destroying Rome. The Roman ideal of constancy logically leads the hero who pursues it to a point where he becomes no longer human, and, in order to remain consistent

virtue. Like Cominius' "It is held...",⁶¹ these are moral hypotheses which are about to be disproved in action. Even as he declares his immovable strength, he admits his weakness:

I melt, and am not
Of stronger earth than others. My mother bows,
As if Olympus to a molehill should
In supplication nod; and my young boy
Hath an aspect of intercession which
Great nature cries "Deny not".⁶²

The natural "bonds," the "instinct" of "affection" towards his mother, his son, his wife, and (later) his native country, are too strong to be simply dismissed by an act of will. Menenius' "He lacks nothing of a god but eternity and a heaven to throne in" unwittingly defines why Coriolanus cannot become a god: he is not enthroned in heaven and eternity, but bound as a human being to the earth and the rest of humanity. A human being on earth cannot maintain the rocklike or godlike constancy Coriolanus aspires to; he must admit his humanity and "melt" from rock to common clay.

In the midst of this inner struggle between constancy and nature, Coriolanus suddenly sees himself once again as an actor:

Like a dull actor now
I have forgot my part, and I am out,
Even to a full disgrace.⁶³

In trying to maintain his immovable constancy (steadfastness) he is merely playing a part. His constancy is the "formal constancy" of an actor who strives to maintain decorum in his performance. Moreover, he is failing, for he has forgotten his lines and cannot stay in character.

This is a crucial moment of insight. Coriolanus always associated acting with hypocrisy and inconstancy, though under pressure he came to acknowledge that he too was trying to play a part consistently: "I play the man I am." Now he realises that his godlike Senecan constancy is also

a part he is acting, one which is not true to his deepest nature, and one which he cannot even play with consistency or decorum. The whole situation, in fact, violates decorum: as Volumnia kneels "unproperly," indecorously, to her own son, proper roles are reversed in a way which Coriolanus feels as an apocalyptic disintegration of the natural order of things. It is an "unnatural scene."⁶⁴ Can it be right to maintain a constancy which leads to such indecorum?

Coriolanus is facing the contradiction Cicero suggested in De officiis:

For in such wise we muste worke, as againste all nature [universam naturam] wee never strive: which thing avoided, let us folow our owne proper nature [propriam naturam].⁶⁵

You must consistently follow your own nature only so far as it is not in conflict with nature in the universal sense. Coriolanus has attempted to be true to his own nature - "Would you have me / False to my nature?" - a nature which, as I have suggested, is itself largely the result of nurture, but which he nevertheless regards as essentially himself. His following of that nature has led him to a state of constancy which is almost divorced from normal humanity. Yet it has led him into conflict with universal nature: that "Great nature" which cries out to him that he must not deny the pleas of his own child. In such a conflict nature is, in Cicero's words, "muche the surer, and the steadfaster." Coriolanus' individual self-assertion, and the social values of Rome, must give way to it.

This is the principle of homologia, harmony and consistency with nature, which underlies the Stoic ideal of constancy in both its Senecan and Ciceronian forms - though it tends to become overlaid by the unnatural ideal of moral perfection in Senecan constantia, and by public role-playing in Cicero's decorum. It is also the principle which underlies

Montaigne's late "philosophy of nature," even though he may have rejected most other aspects of Stoicism. Fundamental to Montaigne's moral vision is the ideal of knowledge of and consistency with both our own nature and universal nature - a consistency not to be found in a pursuit of rigid self-consistency or of an impossible and undesirable Stoic constancy. That Shakespeare shares this ideal, and sees the failure of Rome in its failure to share it, is, I think, implied in Julius Caesar. It is more explicit in Coriolanus, where the hero's pursuit of absolute constancy is brought directly into conflict with universa natura. The tragedy of Coriolanus is that, while he attempts to "play / The man I am," he does not know how to "play the man well and duely." Unlike Brutus and Caesar, however, Coriolanus is granted at least a moment of insight into his own failure.

Thus, we feel, it is inevitable that Coriolanus should give way to Volumnia's pleas and pressures, and has been from the first moment he asks, "Shall I be tempted to infringe my vow...?" At the moment of his submission, the man who had aspired to be raised like a god above human affairs imagines the gods looking down and laughing at the irony of the "unnatural scene."⁶⁶ Indeed, the scene is full of ironies. It is ironic that Volumnia, who had done most to inculcate in her son the unnatural code of Roman virtue, should appeal to him in the name of natural feeling. It is ironic that Coriolanus, in abandoning his constancy to submit to his mother, is in fact being consistent with his submissiveness to her throughout the play. By pursuing and stressing these ironies, one can arrive at a purely ironic and reductive view of the scene. The central irony, however, is in my view Coriolanus' failure to recognise that this moment is not "unnatural," but the most natural moment of the play. In my own experience, the overwhelming effect of this moment is a sense of relief and release, as "Great nature" at last prevails over the

unnaturalness of the ethic of constancy, and the convoluted ironies and paradoxes of the play are temporarily resolved in a moment of simple human feeling.⁶⁷

The resolution is, of course, only temporary. Coriolanus has not permanently changed; the constancy of his nature is too rigidly formed for that.⁶⁸ He returns to the Volscians still boasting of his consistency, justifying himself on the ground that his principles have remained unchanged: "I am return'd your soldier; / No more infected with my country's love / Than when I parted hence...." He is indeed still the same man, as is only too clear when he again responds with automatic violence to the insults "traitor" and "boy," apologising with an almost comic lack of self-knowledge, "'tis the first time that ever / I was forc'd to scold."⁶⁹

Like Shakespeare's other Roman heroes, Coriolanus dies "like himself," concerned to the end with self-consistency and the preservation of his dignitas. His death is entirely consistent with his life in its mingling of violence, nobility, and suicidal obstinacy. Almost his last thought is a concern for the image that others, and posterity, will have of him, and a desperate desire that it should be consistent with the truth about himself as he sees it. He must repudiate Aufidius' definition of him as traitor and boy, and insist upon the heroic image of himself that future "annals" will contain:

If you have writ your annals true, 'tis there
That, like an eagle in a dove-cote, I
Flutter'd your Volscians in Corioli.
Alone I did it. "Boy"!

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Aufidius' final words promise him what he wanted: "a noble memory." It is a truly Roman death. Nevertheless, for a moment Coriolanus had an insight into a kind of virtue less limited than the ideal of constancy.

In the tragedy of the man who said of himself, "I am constant," Shakespeare explores the problems, paradoxes and contradictions of constancy more profoundly than in Julius Caesar. What is constancy? In Coriolanus Shakespeare presents a man who, like Brutus or Caesar, pursues an ideal of constancy (steadfastness and consistency), who tries to be unus idemque inter diversa, "not to be other than one thing," and who aspires like Seneca's sapiens to become as immovable as a rock or a god - but who lacks any trace of Stoic passionlessness or tranquillity. "Constancy," Shakespeare suggests, is not intrinsically linked with the rational Stoic virtues; it may be, as Seneca's tragedies betrayed and as Montaigne explicitly argued, a kind of heroic madness, a violent and extreme aspiration, very dangerous to the society which cultivates it.

This quasi-Senecan form of constancy is brought into conflict with the Roman form of Ciceronian decorum: the ideal of playing one's appropriate role with "formal constancy" before a public audience, while being prepared to modify the performance in the interests of political realism. For Rome's ruling class, Coriolanus is acting the role in which he has been cast. Coriolanus, however, endows decorum with the absoluteness of Senecan constancy: if he is playing a role, "I play / The man I am." His role is his "nature," and he must play it with absolute consistency or destroy his selfhood. Such constancy is incompatible with life in society, and Coriolanus is forced to leave Rome to pursue his aspiration to a superhuman or inhuman immovability.

The insoluble conflict is resolved only by introducing a new term into the equation: nature. Consistency with nature is in Stoic thought, especially as expressed by Cicero and Montaigne, the underlying principle of "constancy." You cannot be consistent with your own nature if you are in conflict with universal nature, "Great nature." Coriolanus is forced

to submit: absolute constancy destroys itself by its own internal contradictions.

Coriolanus is Shakespeare's destructive critique of the flaws and contradictions of constancy as a supreme virtue. In Antony and Cleopatra he explores an alternative ethic, one based instead upon (in Montaigne's words) "the benefit of inconstancy."

CHAPTER TEN

"INFINITE VARIETY":

ANTONY AND CLEOPATRA

Antony and Cleopatra may be seen as a contrasting companion-piece to its successor Coriolanus: while Coriolanus takes constancy to its self-destructive extreme, Antony and Cleopatra are the embodiments of inconstancy.¹ In Antony as in Coriolanus, however, Shakespeare modifies Plutarch's moralistic view of his protagonists as driven by irrational compulsions, and sees them instead as consciously pursuing genuine (albeit flawed) moral ideals. Coriolanus' ideal is that of Roman constancy. Antony, by contrast, pursues an ideal similar to that recommended by Montaigne in his late essays: to accept the "infinite variety" of life and human nature, and embrace "the benefit of inconstancy."²

In a world of mutability and flux, in which Rome's political and moral order has collapsed and a man like Antony is free to define his own identity, Antony refuses to follow the traditional Roman virtues: to commit himself to being always the same, to defend himself against mutability with rocklike constancy and predictable consistency. Instead he immerses himself in the flux. Loving Cleopatra, the epitome of changeableness, and trying to reconcile the two incompatible worlds of Rome and Egypt, he embraces an ideal of variety, diversity, and complexity. Antony and Cleopatra still believe in "decorum" and in being "like themselves," but they empty these familiar Roman concepts of their

connotations of constancy and consistency: their selves are multiple and ever-changing, and "everything becomes" them.³

Shakespeare is aware of both the attractiveness and the danger of such an ideal. In practice, Antony's rejection of consistency leads to vacillation, and his rejection of Stoic constancy to weakness in the face of misfortune; as his world breaks down around him, he finds his unstable identity disintegrating, and finally preserves his sense of selfhood only by a Stoic suicide. Cleopatra, however, triumphs where he failed, achieving in the final moments of the play a paradoxical union of constancy and mutability.

[1] The mutable world of Antony and Cleopatra

The world of Antony and Cleopatra is one of mutability, inconstancy, and flux. This quality has been perceived by almost every critic of the play: Stephen A. Shapiro describes its universe as "Heracleitian," made up of "flux, conflict, and paradox"; John F. Danby sees "something deliquescent in the reality behind the play"; Emrys Jones comments that its characters "Both within and without ... inhabit a medium in perpetual movement."⁴ It is a quality which separates Antony and Cleopatra from the other two Roman plays, both set primarily in Rome and dominated by impressions of the solidity and stability of Rome's physical, political, and moral world. Only an undercurrent in these plays suggested that this solidity rested on shaky foundations and was threatened by chaos. In Antony's later and larger world, solidity has given way to chaos.

The change is in part a political one. The political order of the Roman republic, which dominated the worlds of Coriolanus and Julius Caesar, has now disintegrated. Eternal Rome itself is in a process of

change, from a republic to an empire. What was once a commonwealth (albeit flawed and shaken) has become merely an arena for competing warlords, in which the victor will emerge as emperor, and strength and luck are the sanctions of power. Rome no longer supplies a social structure which gives its citizens a moral code and an identity; Antony, Octavius and the rest move in a vacuum where they must create their own values.

The play's political world is under the domination of fortune - a word which occurs 46 times. It is a world of confusion, intrigue, rumour, treachery, changing allegiances, abrupt rises and falls, in which a man can be master of the world in the morning and a ruined fugitive by nightfall, and in which the death of a major character and contender for power can be casually reported in a subordinate clause. Its symbols are the waxing and waning moon to which Pompey, with unconscious irony, compares his "crescent" power, and the "varying tide" which Octavius uses as an image of popular favour:

This common body,
Like to a vagabond flag upon the stream,
Goes to and back, lackeying the varying tide,
To rot itself with motion.

Its paradigm is the scene on Pompey's galley: the world-rulers drunk and dancing on a ship afloat at sea, unaware that at any moment the ship may be cut adrift and themselves casually murdered. The political world of Antony and Cleopatra is that envisaged by the Stoics: a world ruled by unstable and fickle fortune, a "confusion" (in Montaigne's words) in which every man "doth hourelly see himselfe upon the point of his fortunes overthrow and downfall," and in which nothing is stable or to be relied upon except the constancy of the individual human soul.

The human soul, however, is in this play no more stable than the

external political world. There is perpetual motion, as Jones commented, within as well as without the characters. Cleopatra, of course, is the epitome of inconstancy and capriciousness; Antony too shifts unpredictably between extremes of sensuality and austerity, love and jealousy, courage and self-pity. Cleopatra's line, "Let him for ever go - let him not, Charmian," captures the fluidity of their emotions and their relationship.⁸ Even the most rational characters suffer from unpredictable changes of mood: Enobarbus betrays Antony out of pragmatic self-interest and then dies of grief and guilt, Octavius weeps for the death of Antony whom he has driven to death. This paradox of mourning for one's enemies recurs throughout the play, as an example of how (in Antony's words), "the present pleasure, / By revolution lowering, does become / The opposite of itself."⁹ Human emotions too "revolve" like fortune's wheel. Shakespeare, as I have argued earlier, seems here to be influenced by Montaigne, who uses this same psychological quirk to illustrate "the volubilitie and suppleness of our minde" and the unpredictable way in which different emotions can succeed one another.¹⁰

Truth itself seems in the play to be in a state of flux. We are presented with a babble of reports and rumours, and contradictory opinions by a variety of "choric" characters; we see events and characters from varying perspectives and see how their apparent meanings change; ironic tricks are played with our expectations (after a series of scenes laden with portents of doom for Antony, he unexpectedly wins a battle); the characters themselves, even the lovers, fail to understand one another's actions, emotions, or motives; some of the most crucial events in the play are wrapped in obscurity.¹¹ The problems of knowledge and judgement in the other Roman plays here become insistent and omnipresent; Antony and Cleopatra seems to demand that we pass judgements while undermining our ability to do so.

Mutability also dominates the play's language, with imagery of flowing water, tides, mud, quicksands, wind and rain, the moon, transformation, melting, and decay. The first speech of the play contains images of dotage which "o'erflows," of glowing eyes which "bend" and "turn," of a heart which has "become" a bellows and a fan, of "the triple pillar of the world transform'd / Into a strumpet's fool."¹² The images suggest a Dali-like world - perhaps, for Shakespeare, a more appropriate comparison is the world of Ovid's Metamorphoses - in which things undergo perpetual, almost grotesque transformations. This sense of things reaches its climax in Antony's vision of the shapes in the clouds to which he compares his own dissolving being.¹³

Shakespeare's sense of universal mutability in Antony and Cleopatra no doubt owes something to Ovid, and something to traditional Christian commonplaces about the instability of all worldly things. More specifically, however, it seems to echo the preoccupations of Stoicism and of Renaissance Neostoicism: Seneca's descriptions of a world under the domination of fortune, Lipsius' vision of "the alterations of all humane affares: and the swelling and swaging of them as of the sea."¹⁴ Most of all, I believe, it is indebted to Montaigne, whose consistent vision of the inconstancy of all things carries him from a Neostoic cult of constancy to a quite un-Stoic acceptance of uncertainty and flux. His vision in the "Apologie" of universal flux, in which nothing is certain because "both the judgeing and the judged ... [are] in continuall alteration and motion"; his stress on the inconsistency of human character, in which "all is but changing, motion, and inconstancy," and it is impossible to wrest our actions into any semblance of consistency; his assertion that "The world runnes all on wheelles. All things therein moove without intermission; yea the earth, the rockes of Caucasus, and the Pyramides of Ægypt....," so that even his own self goes "unquietly and

staggering, with a naturall drunkenesse" - these seem the best
 commentaries on the world of Antony and Cleopatra.¹⁵ Shakespeare may be
 echoing this last passage when, in the galley scene, Menas wishes that the
 whole world were drunk "That it might go on wheels!" The ambiguity of
 this colloquial phrase (it can suggest either effortless ease or wildly
 uncontrolled motion) suggests, both in Florio and in Shakespeare, the
 mixture of excitement and unpleasant giddiness which such a world can
 produce.¹⁶

Such a mutable world would naturally induce a Stoic response. This is
 what Lipsius recommended at the climax of his vision of "the alterations
 of all humane affares": "Imprint CONSTANCIE in thy mind amid this casuall
 and inconstant variableness of all things." Constancy is, indeed, the
 traditional Roman response, and I shall look briefly at the continuation
 of this tradition by Octavius and others, before turning to the very
 different response of Antony and Cleopatra.

[2] Octavius and Roman constancy

The mutability which rules the world of Antony and Cleopatra is the
 opposite of Roman constancy. In the other Roman plays we have glimpses of
 a chaos which threatens the stability of Rome and its moral code. In
Julius Caesar it is embodied in the monstrous prodigies of the storm in
 which Rome "shakes like a thing unfirm," and which seem to reflect the
 irrational passion and violence which lie beneath the surface of Roman
 constancy; in Coriolanus, we glimpse it in the hero's panicky vision of a
 world of sheer moral flux ("O world, thy slippery turns!"¹⁷). Constancy
 is Rome's defence against such a vision of the world. It imposes a code
 of rationality, consistency and predictability upon the vagaries of human

behaviour; opposes an ideal of immovable strength and steadfastness to the changeableness of fortune; and sets up a firmly agreed set of Roman opinions and values to make up for the impossibility of knowing absolute truth. In Antony, however, with the decay of Roman order, chaos and flux have risen to dominate the play's world.

Rome, it is true, is still associated with order and constancy. A symbolic contrast runs through the play's imagery between Roman stability and Egypt's abandonment to flux. Egypt is continually associated with water, the tides of the sea, the overflowing fertility of the Nile; Rome is associated with dry land, and with images of restraint, control, and geometrical rigidity: the arch, the set-square, the unslipping knot. When Antony declares, "Let Rome in Tiber melt, and the wide arch / Of the ranged empire fall!", he is symbolically renouncing Rome's ordered stability for Egyptian fluidity and change.¹⁸ Yet the contrast is more symbolic than real. As I have already suggested, Rome's political order has already "melted" into anarchy and civil war; the distinctions between Rome and Egypt are beginning to blur and dissolve, as Antony and his followers take to Egyptian life, Pompey hopefully tries to put on an "Alexandrian feast," and Dolabella is converted to the "religion" of Cleopatra's love - while Cleopatra, of course, dies "after the high Roman fashion."¹⁹ This phrase of Cleopatra's is one of very few in the play where the word "Roman" has the moral connotations it had in Julius Caesar; in Antony "Rome" is a place-name, not a moral norm, and Romans are guided mainly by political expediency.²⁰

The Roman virtue of constancy is represented most obviously by Antony's antagonist, Octavius Caesar. He is unchanging and consistent, self-controlled, temperate, seldom showing emotion and never led by it to act irrationally. In his first appearance, he eloquently condemns Antony's abandonment to sensual excess, and praises by contrast his

steadfast endurance of hardship in a past military crisis - in a close paraphrase of the passage where Plutarch (in North's translation) praises Antony as "constant."²¹ These are traditional Roman judgements: Coriolanus would have echoed Octavius' praise of military virtus, Brutus his respect for constant endurance and his insistence on the superiority of spirit to body.

Nevertheless, Octavius is an inadequate representative of Roman constancy. If he never surrenders to passion, it is because he seems to have no passions to overcome; if he is steadfast, he never has any serious adversity to test him; he does not defy fortune in the Stoic way, but is carried along by it to success, becoming in Cleopatra's phrase "Fortune's knave, / A minister of her will." His debasement of Stoic ideas is epitomised in the words of his emissary Thidias trying to persuade Cleopatra to betray Antony: "Wisdom and fortune combating together, / If that the former dare but what it can, / No chance may shake it." The fundamental Stoic principle that the wise man cares only for what is within his power (by which the Stoics meant his own reason and virtue) is here perverted into a counsel of cynical expediency.²² Octavius' ultimate aim is worldly success, and his values are based upon political pragmatism. He is willing for the sake of argument to "grant it is not / Amiss" for Antony to indulge his un-Roman vices, if only they were not damaging the public image and power of the triumvirate. For Octavius, virtue is a matter of appearances. He is preoccupied (despite his contempt for popular opinion) with the way the world will see and judge him, and is anxious (in Proculeius' revealing phrase) to "Let the world see / His nobleness well acted...."²³ The Roman principle of esse est percipi, the Roman confusion of public appearances with emotional realities, is reduced almost to absurdity when Octavius chides his sister for not giving him a chance to organise a public reception for her: she

has "prevented / The ostentation of our love, which left unshown / Is
 often left unlov'²⁴d."

Octavius is in a sense the ultimate development of the Roman ideal of constancy: immovably rational, consistent, self-controlled, somewhat inhuman, preoccupied with external appearances and "formal constancy." Nevertheless, he represents a diminished and degenerate form of the ideal. He lacks any trace of the greatness, however flawed, of Shakespeare's other Roman heroes: Brutus' pursuit of a more-than-human virtue, Julius Caesar's aspiration to be constant as the northern star, Coriolanus' heroic steadfastness and imitation of the graces of the gods. In Octavius the merely external and formal strain in Roman virtue has completely replaced its strain of heroic aspiration.

Antony, on the other hand, continues to aspire, as Coriolanus and Caesar did, to a kind of godlike greatness. Unlike them, however, he does not aspire to it through constancy.

[3] "Whom everything becomes": the ideal of inconstancy

Instead of Stoic constancy, Antony responds to the mutability of his world by positively accepting and sharing its mutability, redefining the Roman concepts of decorum and being "like oneself" in terms not of constancy and consistency but of change and variety.

Plutarch's "Life" presents Antonius as a man whose flaw is inconstancy. He is a weak and fickle character, unstable and vacillating, governed by emotion and sensuality rather than reason, and swayed by the influence of Cleopatra away from Roman virtue to degradation and death. This interpretation can be, and often has been, read into Shakespeare's play. Antony, on this view, is divided between the two worlds of Egypt

and Rome, between the love of Cleopatra and his political role, and between the opposed ways of life and sets of values which Egypt and Rome stand for: love and politics, feeling and reason, the flesh and the world, private and public life, control and freedom, or however else one wishes to define them.²⁵ It is not (on this view) simply that Antony rejects Rome for Egypt: he suggests such a decision when he declares in the opening scene, "Let Rome in Tiber melt," but in the next scene he reverses himself, leaving Cleopatra and returning to Rome to his political duty and a political marriage. Throughout the play this pattern repeats itself, as Antony fails to make and stick to any consistent choice between his two worlds. Weak and indecisive, he wavers back and forth, swayed now by Cleopatra, now by Octavius, making critical decisions by whim or default, acted upon by others rather than acting, until he drifts at last to disaster and a messy and ignoble death.

There is an element of truth in this view of the play, but it is inadequate. Antony is not simply unable to choose between the two worlds between which he moves; he positively refuses to choose between them. He is not satisfied to be bound to either the Roman or the Egyptian world, but wants to combine them both, to be both a soldier and a lover, have both honour and pleasure, be great both in public and private life.²⁶

Antony's ideal seems very close to that which Montaigne describes in "Of Three Commerces or Societies":

Our chiefest sufficiency is, to apply our selves to divers fashions. It is a being, but not a life, to bee tied and bound by necessity to one onely course. The goodliest mindes are those that have most variety and pliableness in them.²⁷

Antony refuses to be "bound ... to one onely course." He rejects the Stoic ideal of immovable constancy and self-consistency, to be unus idemque inter diversa, or (like Coriolanus) "not to be other than one

thing." Instead he wants to be, like Cleopatra, many things, and to respond in "divers fashions" to diverse situations. He is willing to surrender himself to the variousness and mutability of his world, and to change in response to it; to adopt different modes of behaviour in Rome or in Egypt, to seek a variety of transient pleasures ("There's not a minute of our lives should stretch / Without some pleasure now"), to be responsive to the different "qualities of people," to indulge in games of self-transformation such as the exchange of clothes with Cleopatra. His philosophy seems to be voiced by Enobarbus: "Every time / Serves for the matter that is then born in't."²⁸ Antony echoes this when in the galley scene he advises Octavius to "Be a child o'th' time" - respond appropriately to the changing demands of each situation. This is precisely what Coriolanus was disastrously unable to do, with his insistence upon acting in exactly the same way in all situations; it is also unlike Brutus, with his refusal to bend his rigid principles, or Caesar, who boasted of his inability to change; and it is an attitude which Octavius also rejects, in his response, "Possess it, I'll make answer"²⁹ - don't respond to situations but control them. To surrender to mutability and change, as Antony recommends, is anathema to the Roman ideal of constancy.

The symbol, if not indeed the cause, of this philosophy of Antony's is his love for Cleopatra.³⁰ Cleopatra is the very embodiment of the mutability and inconstancy of the play, associated as she is with the moon - her planet is "the fleeting moon," and she is herself is "our terrene moon" - and with the flux of the Nile ("my serpent of old Nile").³¹ "Variety and pliability" are her leading qualities: "Age cannot wither her, nor custom stale / Her infinite variety." Enobarbus may, as the context suggests, be thinking primarily of her variety of sexual arts; but the phrase suggests wider implications: Cleopatra's

fascination for Antony, and for us, lies in her unpredictability, her darting momentary interest in anything, her mercurial changes of mood and personality, in which genuine feelings are blended with playful or manipulative play-acting ("If you find him sad, / Say I am dancing; if in mirth, report / That I am sudden sick") so as to keep even Antony perpetually off balance.³² He sums up this quality in her with a mixture of exasperation and admiration:

Fie, wrangling queen!
Whom everything becomes - to chide, to laugh,
To weep; whose every passion fully strives
To make itself in thee fair and admir'd.³³

Whatever Cleopatra does, she does with absolute commitment, and it is beautiful and appropriate in her - it "becomes" her.

Cleopatra returns the compliment in very similar terms when, a few scenes later, she asks Alexas if Antony was sad or merry as he left Egypt:

ALEXAS. Like to the time o'th' year between the extremes
Of hot and cold; he was nor sad nor merry.
CLEOPATRA. O well-divided disposition! Note him,
Note him, good Charmian; 'tis the man; but note him!
He was not sad, for he would shine on those
That make their looks by his; he was not merry,
Which seem'd to tell them his remembrance lay
In Egypt with his joy; but between both.
O heavenly mingle! Be'st thou sad or merry,
The violence of either thee becomes,
So does it no man else.

Cleopatra seems at first to be praising Antony for a kind of Roman temperance which refuses to over-indulge any emotion. The last lines, however, take the idea in an unexpected and contradictory direction. Commentators fret over the illogicality of "The violence of either thee becomes," Ridley suggesting that Cleopatra must mean "Even if he had to run to either extreme it would still have become him."³⁴ Her meaning is,

I think, more complex and paradoxical than that. She evokes the ideal of temperance and constancy only to subvert it. Antony's "heavenly mingle" is not a grey area between opposite extremes of emotion, but a mingling of two emotions both so strong that they cancel one another out. This phrase sums up the ideal of Antony and Cleopatra: not to choose a single consistent course, nor find a happy medium between opposite courses, but to combine "the violence of either," to fuse conflicting extremes, to experience all aspects of life to their fullest, alternately or simultaneously. Like Montaigne's, it is an ideal of "variety" as opposed to Stoic constancy - but more extreme, paradoxical, and "violent" than the moderate adaptability Montaigne recommended.

In rejecting Roman constancy, Antony is in a sense also rejecting decorum. Ciceronian decorum depends upon constancy (consistency): "stedfastnes ... becommeth moste of all." You must choose a single appropriate role and play it consistently throughout your life. Although Cicero acknowledges that young people may find it hard to make such a choice, he devotes little space to this problem, and regards it as one suffered only by the young.³⁵ He would certainly regard Antony's refusal to settle down to a single consistent course as a sign of immaturity and moral weakness, and a failure in decorum.

In another sense, however, Antony and Cleopatra are not defying but redefining decorum.³⁶ It is significant that, of only three uses of the word "decorum" by Shakespeare, two occur in Antony and Cleopatra, and both are spoken not by Romans but by Egyptians: Iras' prayer to Isis to "keep decorum" and cuckold the knave Alexas, and Cleopatra's assertion to Octavius' envoy that "majesty, to keep decorum, must / No less beg than a kingdom."³⁷ The first use is facetious, the second grandiloquent but edged with irony (since the idea of a queen begging is in itself grossly indecorous). Nevertheless, even if half-ironically, Cleopatra and her

court invoke the principle of decorum, and do so more explicitly than any other characters in Shakespeare. Yet Cleopatra's actions frequently outrage the conventional idea of decorum - hopping forty paces through the public street, or physically assaulting a messenger, are not actions which would normally be thought "fitting" for a queen; and if "stedastnes ... becommeth moste of all," the inconstant Cleopatra is the least decorous of human beings. Clearly the Egyptian idea of decorum differs from the Ciceronian and Roman one.

Moreover, the words "become" and "becoming," which Grimalde used to translate Cicero's decet and decorum, occur with unusual regularity in the play, often (though not always) in this sense.³⁸ Cleopatra tells Antony that "my becomings kill me when they do not / Eye well to you"; Octavius responds to Lepidus' defence of Antony's faults with the grudging hypothesis, "Say this becomes him...."; Lepidus tells Enobarbus that it "shall become you well" to entreat Antony to moderation; Enobarbus, speaking of Cleopatra's "infinite variety," declares that "vilest things / Become themselves in her"; Octavius (cryptically) orders Thidias to³⁹ "Observe how Antony becomes his flaw." The question of what "becoming" means, and how one decides what "becomes" a person, is subtly but insistently raised.

The most striking uses of the word are the two passages quoted earlier, in which Antony declares that "everything becomes" Cleopatra, and Cleopatra says that the violence of either mirth or sadness "becomes" Antony. Whatever Cleopatra does, she is observing decorum, because everything is appropriate or "comely" for her; whatever extremes of emotion Antony flies to, they are decorous for him (if for no-one else). Decorum for Antony and Cleopatra does not, as it does for Cicero or for Roman tradition, involve self-consistency. They are themselves so diverse and universal in their potentialities that nothing they do can be

inconsistent with themselves. Hence, nothing can be indecorous: even "vilest things" become them.

Moreover, Shakespeare exploits the double meaning of the word "become," linking the ideas of decorum and change.⁴⁰ When Cleopatra speaks of "my becomings," the word seems to embrace both "the things which become me" and "the things I become"; Enobarbus' "vilest things become themselves" suggests not only that they become or befit Cleopatra, but also that they become truly themselves, achieve their own perfection and are transformed from vileness into something rich and strange. Decorum in this world, it is suggested, does not mean being constantly one thing, but "becoming" - changing continually to adapt to a changing world.

Antony and Cleopatra redefine decorum by emptying it of its Ciceronian and Roman associations with constancy and consistency. For a complex individual in a perpetually changing world, decorum cannot be defined as being always the same: it must involve the ability to become a variety of different things, to explore one's full potential, to adapt to changing situations and "be a child o'th' time." This development illustrates the chameleon quality of the concept of decorum itself. Rome's code of public-spirited formal role-playing, Coriolanus' pursuit of truth to his rigidly defined self, and Antony and Cleopatra's pursuit of "infinite variety" can all be justified by selective reference to De officiis I.

Throughout the Roman plays the idea of being oneself, or "like oneself," is present as a moral ideal closely related to constancy and decorum. It is present in Antony and Cleopatra as well, but, like decorum, it tends to become divorced from the idea of constancy.

In answer to Lepidus' plea that it would become him to entreat Antony to gentle speech, Enobarbus says, "I shall entreat him / To answer like himself."⁴¹ It is the formula that Lucilius used of Brutus in Julius Caesar. Lucilius, however, meant that Brutus, being Brutus, could not

possibly do other than kill himself - and he was soon able to point out with some complacency that his prediction was correct. Antony is far less predictable, and it is less clear what acting "like himself" means for him. Enobarbus wants him to take a firm, Coriolanus-like stand; Lepidus wants him to be mild and gentle; in the event, Antony moves through a variety of moods (generosity, offended pride, flippancy, dignified apology) towards a politic compromise. Which is more "like himself"? What does it mean for Antony to be "like himself"?

This question is insistently raised in the first scene. The burden of Philo's opening speech is that Antony is no longer himself: the great Roman general and world-ruler is "transform'd / Into a strumpet's fool." Antony himself speaks as one who has found his true self: "Here is my space. ... The nobleness of life / Is to do thus...." Yet Cleopatra accuses him of falsehood and pretence, and adds, "I'll seem the fool I am not. Antony / Will be himself." It is impossible to define with any certainty what she means: that Antony will act like a fool, or like a Roman, or nobly, or however he pleases? The sibylline ambiguity of her words forces us to wonder what it does mean for Antony to "be himself."⁴² Antony's answer, "But stirr'd by Cleopatra," implies that he will only be truly himself when under Cleopatra's influence. Once the lovers have gone, however, Philo and Demetrius restate their very different judgement:

Sir, sometimes when he is not Antony,
He comes too short of that great property⁴³
Which still should go with Antony.

Antony is not being Antony, and is failing to play the part of himself with decorum ("property," I think, here includes the sense of propriety, fitness, decorum: OED 7). Their criticism begs the question at issue: what is Antony?

The desire to be "like oneself" is a traditional Roman and Stoic one.

For Shakespeare's other Roman heroes, however, the self to which they must be true is easily defined; it is single and consistent, shaped by their social role and the opinions of others. Everyone knows that when Caesar says "always I am Caesar" he means that he is always fearless and in control; to be Brutus is to be calm and just, to be Coriolanus is to be courageous, proud and steadfast. Antony is not so easily defined. His identity is not shaped by his social role, since he is not Rome's servant but its potential ruler; nor by the opinions of his social equals (for he has none, except Octavius) or of the Roman people (to whom he is indifferent). He must define his own identity. Yet he refuses to do this by limiting himself to a single easily defined role or persona, tying himself down to be always the same. Antony can only be defined as being like Antony - like the crocodile, which (in a tongue-in-cheek application of the formula) is "shap'd ... like itself."⁴⁴ What being like Antony means, he must himself determine from moment to moment.

Unlike the decorum pursued by Brutus, Caesar, and Coriolanus, or the Roman codes of being "Roman" or "noble," this ideal of being Antony does not depend upon the opinions of others; it demands self-knowledge. It is like those other codes, however, in its self-defining circularity. Whereas the Romans of Julius Caesar, defining virtue as "being Roman," could look to the stable society around them to define what that meant, Antony can only define his ideal in terms of his own continually changing self. It is not surprising that, in the mutable world of Antony and Cleopatra, he is in danger of losing himself.

[4] "I am Antony yet": the tragedy of Antony

Shakespeare is well aware of the dangers of Antony's ideal of variety. Though in some ways more attractive than the rigid, limited, self-deceiving and self-destructive constancy of a Brutus or Coriolanus, it cannot give him the firmness of purpose or the rocklike endurance in adversity which their Stoic constancy gives them. In the end, ruined by misfortune, finding nothing stable to rely on and even his own identity dissolving, he is forced to resort to Stoic constancy through suicide.

I have argued earlier that to interpret Antony's inconstancy simply as weakness is an oversimplification; yet there is a truth in this view which must be acknowledged. Antony's refusal to commit himself to a single way of life, though appealing as an ideal, leads in practice to vacillation and self-contradiction. In I.i we see him grandly rejecting Rome and empire in favour of Cleopatra and love; in I.ii "a Roman thought hath struck him," and he is determined to break his "Egyptian fetters." In I.iii he reaches a precarious equilibrium, declaring that he goes to Rome as Cleopatra's "soldier, servant," and this heroic compromise is beautifully expressed in his message to Cleopatra in I.v ("`Say the firm Roman to great Egypt sends / This treasure of an oyster....`"), Alexas' picture of him soberly mounting his spirited horse, and Cleopatra's praise of his "heavenly mingle." Momentarily (as later in the triumphant scenes after the land victory in Act IV), we see an Antony who has successfully blended "the violence of either" - Roman soldiership and Egyptian love. Once he reaches Rome, however, the equilibrium collapses, and Antony is apologising for his "poison'd hours" and patching up a political marriage - which will be no sooner made than broken when he returns to

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Cleopatra. Unlike the immovable Julius Caesar or Coriolanus, Antony is in ceaseless movement back and forth, like the "vagabond flag" of

Octavius' image, which "Goes to and back, lackeying the varying tide, / To rot itself with motion."

Antony's "well-divided disposition" is thus most often divided against itself. His lack of "singleness of aim" makes him vulnerable to the more single-minded Octavius, who advances calmly and steadily towards his goal of political power.⁴⁶ Antony, with his philosophy of inconstancy, abandons himself to the power of fortune which rules the play's world. We see this most clearly in his decision in III.vi to fight Octavius at sea - a decision which is shown not only as a tactical blunder on the realistic level, but also as a symbolic choice of Egyptian flux over Roman stability -

Let th'Egyptians
And the Phoenicians go a-ducking; we
Have us'd to conquer standing on the earth
And standing foot to foot -

and of chance over certainty -

[you] quite forgo
The way which promises assurance; and
Give up yourself merely to chance and hazard
From firm security.

Antony is following a principle, but the principle is clearly judged as foolish, and his feeble afterthought - "if we fail, / We then can do't at land" - exposes the weakness of a moral position based on trying to have it both ways.⁴⁷

Antony's failure in these later acts can easily be judged from a Stoic point of view. His commitment to fortune and mutability, though it can make him magnificent in victory, means that he lacks the constancy to withstand suffering and defeat. Under the pressure of external events and his own fluctuating emotions, he swings wildly between heroic leadership

and defeatist self-pity, confidence and despair, rage and calm, love and jealousy of Cleopatra. His attempts to deal with grief and despair in Montaigne's way by "diversion" - "Let's to supper, come, / And drown consideration" - seem like weak escapism in the face of crises which demand a positive response.⁴⁸ Enobarbus keeps up a quasi-Stoic commentary on Antony's irrationality and inconstancy, which he contrasts with the Stoic idea that human reason can be unaffected by external misfortune:

I see men's judgments are
A parcel of their fortunes, and things outward
Do draw the inward quality after them,
To suffer all alike.

Antony's bursts of courage Enobarbus sees, in a cold Senecan comment, as merely the temporary displacement of one irrational passion by another:⁴⁹
"To be furious / Is to be frightened out of fear..."

Lacking the inner strength and self-reliance of Stoic constancy, Antony depends upon externals - his honour and his love of Cleopatra - to give him stability and define who and what he is. In Stoic terms, he is depending upon things which are under the control of fortune and are likely to fail him. His military honour, the authority and respect he commands among his followers, begins to melt away with his flight to Egypt and his first defeats, and with it Antony's own self-respect begins to crumble. His glib self-justification to Octavia, "If I lose mine honour, / I lose myself," proves prophetic. After the disaster of Actium, he feels lost, "unqualified with very shame," shattered by the loss of his own image of himself as a great soldier.⁵⁰ The love of Cleopatra is equally, in Stoic terms, under the control of fortune. How is it possible to rely for stability on the love of a woman who is the incarnation of inconstancy? May she not be inconstant in the sense of infidelity as well as of inconsistency? Shakespeare leaves it teasingly ambiguous whether

Cleopatra in fact is, or contemplates being, unfaithful, but when Antony finds her giving her hand to Octavius' emissary he has some cause to assume that she has "been a boggler ever."⁵¹

In the scene that follows, Antony, having lost his authority as a general and his faith in Cleopatra, feels his world and his identity disintegrating around him. Complaining as his servants neglect his orders that "Authority melts from me," recalling the instant obedience he once commanded, he desperately asserts, "I am / Antony yet." He is no longer sure, though, that Cleopatra is who he thought she was: "what's her name / Since she was Cleopatra?" "Not know me yet?" Cleopatra asks him; but Antony is preoccupied with his own identity, and pathetically chides Octavius for "harping on what I am, / Not what he knew I was": the heroic Antony is merely a memory. Finally, as Cleopatra swears her fidelity, Antony recovers his love and courage in a burst of bravado, and Cleopatra rejoices: "since my lord / Is Antony again, I will be Cleopatra."⁵²

Throughout this scene the names "Antony" and "Cleopatra" echo, as the names "Brutus" and "Caesar" did in Julius Caesar, and as in the earlier play the names seem to stand for ideal selves which the characters must live up to. In Julius Caesar, however, the roles implied by the names were clearly defined, single and unambiguous. In Antony and Cleopatra, they are shifting, ambiguous, and continually changing. Antony cannot define from moment to moment what Cleopatra is, nor, as he tries to depend upon her, what he himself is.

At last, totally defeated and ruined, betrayed (as he thinks) by Cleopatra, Antony feels his identity dissolving like the evanescent shapes which momentarily appear and disappear in the clouds:

That which is now a horse, even with a thought
The rack dislimns, and makes it indistinct,
As water is in water. ...
My good knave Eros, now thy captain is

Even such a body. Here I am Antony;
 Yet cannot hold this visible shape, my knave.⁵³

In the mutable world of Antony and Cleopatra, the hero who tried to embrace an ideal of "variety and flexibleness," to explore a variety of selves, finds his very existence melting into the flux.

In response, Antony at last embraces Stoic constancy. "Nay, weep not,
 gentle Eros; there is left us / Ourselves to end ourselves."⁵⁴ By the familiar Stoic paradox, he will assert his selfhood by killing himself, taking control of his life by ending it, preserve his dignitas by fixing himself for posterity in a way that is beyond change. His exchange with Cleopatra echoes the words of Strato and Lucilius over Brutus' body:

ANTONY. Not Caesar's valour hath o'erthrown Antony,
 But Antony's hath triumph'd on itself.
 CLEOPATRA. So should it be, that none but Antony
 Should conquer Antony; but woe 'tis so!⁵⁵

Like the other Roman heroes, Antony dies "like himself," insisting that his death is worthy of and consistent with his self, and, by pronouncing his own epitaph in the third person, attempting to define what posterity will say of him. By doing so, of course, he defines what being "like Antony" means. At last, in death, he acquires a fixed and constant identity. It is largely that of the noble Roman soldier, "a Roman by a Roman / Valiantly vanquished"; as Stephen A. Shapiro puts it, Antony "is clasped by death in the posture of a noble Roman and held rigid." At the same time, he also dies as Cleopatra's lover, after the last of many thousand kisses. His suicide is that of a Stoic "conqueror of myself,"⁵⁶ but also that of a joyful lover, "A bridegroom in my death." In his last moments he reaches again the precarious equilibrium he held at some moments of the play, and finally fixes his identity at that point of rest.

Our inclination to take this as a resolution of Antony's quest is

qualified, however, by the atmosphere of mess and muddle which surrounds it. If we see Antony's suicide, in the Stoic way, as a staged performance, then it is reduced to tragicomedy, almost to farce, by the accidents which beset it: the unscripted and inconvenient suicide of a minor character, the bungling of the crucial business of the stabbing, the awkward staging of the death scene which requires Antony to be hauled up to Cleopatra on ropes, the cross-purposes of the lovers' final dialogue. Antony's Stoic death seems like a tragicomic attempt to attain stability in a world whose mutability and confusion undercuts any such attempt. It is Cleopatra, in the final act, who succeeds where Antony failed, in staging her own death with tragic dignity and decorum, and in reconciling the values of constancy and inconstancy.

[5] Marble-constancy and the fleeting moon: the triumph of Cleopatra

As soon as Antony is dead, Cleopatra, in her grief and despair and her desire to frustrate Octavius' victory, determines to follow him in a Roman suicide: "what's brave, what's noble, / Let's do it after the high Roman fashion, / And make death proud to take us." Her "resolution" quickly hardens into a Stoic philosophy:

My desolation does begin to make
 A better life. 'Tis paltry to be Caesar:
 Not being Fortune, he's but Fortune's knave,
 A minister of her will; and it is great
 To do that thing that ends all other deeds,
 Which shackles accidents and bolts up change,
 Which sleeps, and never palates more the [dung],
 The beggar's nurse and Caesar's.

This is the most explicit and eloquent statement of Stoic ideas in the

Roman plays. Octavius, in his commitment to worldly success, is merely "Fortune's knave"; Cleopatra, in her willingness to die, is more truly free and "great" than he is. Suicide will liberate her from the contemptible world which is under the domination of fortune. It "shackles accidents and bolts up change": puts an end to the power of fortune and mutability over her, and places her in a state of immutable constancy in which she will never change or be affected by worldly changes. Cleopatra, hitherto the play's incarnation of mutability and inconstancy, now (it seems) decisively rejects these qualities in favour of the ideal of Stoic constancy:

My resolution's plac'd, and I have nothing
Of woman in me. Now from head to foot
I am marble-constant; now the fleeting moon
No planet is of mine.⁵⁸

This is, significantly, the play's first and only use of the word "constant."

It is easy, by such selective quotations, to make Cleopatra seem purely Stoic and constant, another Brutus or Portia. In fact our total impression is much more complex. Despite her assertions of "resolution," she keeps her options open till the end: the Seleucus episode leaves it teasingly ambiguous, as so often in the play, whether she genuinely hopes to live or (as in Plutarch) is merely tricking Octavius into thinking she does; and she does not make the final decision to die until Dolabella⁵⁹ confirms Octavius' plan to lead her in triumph.

More crucially, even when she is absolute for death, Cleopatra is not petrified into the single-minded marble constancy which Brutus or Coriolanus face death. She remains various and mercurial, under the influence of the fleeting moon, to the very end. As she prepares for death, sentiments of Roman nobility and Stoic resolution are mingled with

almost every other possible mood - royal pride, tenderness, vanity, jealousy, humour and satiric mockery, "Immortal longings," a love for Antony which is both idealistic and sensual, and an anticipation of a very physical reunion with him after death. In her final moments, her thoughts and feelings dart from admiration of Iras, to a half-serious jealousy of her, to a sudden fascinated sympathy with the snake which is to kill her, to a flash of malicious mockery of Caesar, to the tender fantasy of "the baby at my breast," to the final thought of Antony mingled with a sensuous appreciation of the physical sensations of dying ("As sweet as balm, as soft as air, as gentle -"). Cleopatra remains to the end a mass of contradictions and paradoxes, summed up in the audacious clash of registers in Charmian's epitaph: "A lass unparallel'd."⁶⁰

Despite her use of Stoic ideas and language, then, Cleopatra's death is in many ways thoroughly un-Stoic. At the same time, its motives and manner are very close to those of the traditional Stoic suicide, as defined by Seneca and practiced by Cato or Brutus. Like them, Cleopatra dies "like herself," for the sake of dignitas, to preserve and fix her own identity in a way that cannot be forced to change; like them, she stages her own death as a public demonstration of what she is and will now immutably remain. Octavius, by leading Cleopatra in triumph, wants to define her in the way Rome sees her, and fix her forever, as the Roman actors will stage her, "I'th' posture of a whore." Instead, Cleopatra puts on her own performance, with appropriate setting, costumes, and properties, in Shakespeare's most magnificent presentation of the Senecan "posture of dying." She dies like herself, with perfect decorum, as Charmian says: "It is well done, and fitting for a princess / Descended of so many royal kings."⁶¹ In doing so, she defines forever the image which posterity will have of her.

The difference between Cleopatra's death and the other Stoic suicides

of the Roman plays lies in her concept of decorum. Dying "like herself" is not for her so simple as for a Brutus or a Coriolanus. Despite her verbal rejection of the fleeting moon in favour of marble constancy, Cleopatra in her death combines the two. She does not reject her un-Roman and un-Stoic qualities - emotionalism, sensuality, frivolity, capriciousness, changeableness - but maintains them to the end along with her new Stoic dignity and resolution. In death she attains constancy, and will remain "always like herself" forever; but that self is not single and simple, unus idemque, but multiple and various, embracing all her contradictory qualities. Thus she achieves a paradoxical fusion of "the violence of either" of the play's two conflicting forces, constancy and mutability: she becomes constant in inconstancy, or (to adopt a phrase of Spenser's) "eterne in mutabilitie."⁶²

Antony and Cleopatra goes further than either its predecessor Julius Caesar or its successor Coriolanus in its portrayal of a world whose governing principle is inconstancy, and of the search for an alternative to Roman constancy as a response to that world. The play's imaginative world is that perceived with revulsion by the Stoics and Neostoics, and with a blend of unease and acceptance by Montaigne: a world of mutability and flux, in which nothing is certain, and in which the political and moral solidities of Rome have become mere empty forms. In response, the two main characters - Cleopatra by nature, Antony by choice - reject the ideal of Roman constancy in favour of an ideal which Shakespeare, I believe, derived from Montaigne's late essays: an acceptance of the inherent and inescapable inconstancy of all things, including human nature, and a concept of "decorum" which depends not upon being always the same, but upon changing to adapt to changing situations and the "infinite variety" of one's own potentialities.

Shakespeare makes us feel both the powerful attractiveness and the danger of this ideal. In its pursuit, Antony disintegrates because of his lack of a solid core of stable identity with which to resist changing fortunes, and is finally forced into the Stoic response of self-preservation through suicide. Cleopatra, though she takes the same road, paradoxically manages to reconcile in her death the play's conflicting forces, combining the strength of Roman constancy with her own inconstant variety, and so triumphing both over the flux of fortune which would dissolve her, and the rigid Octavius who would fix her in a single degrading posture.

Cleopatra's triumph, by breaking out of the rigid limitations of the Roman ethic of constancy, makes the ending of Antony and Cleopatra more liberating than that of the other two Roman plays. Nevertheless, it is the extraordinary achievement of an extraordinary woman, and one possible only in death. Shakespeare's exploration of the conflict between mutability and constancy ends with no simple moral solution.

CONCLUSION:

"WERE MAN BUT CONSTANT....."

At the climax of what is perhaps Shakespeare's first play, the inconstant Proteus cries,

O heaven, were man
But constant, he were perfect! That one error
Fills him with faults; makes him run through all th'sins....¹

He is voicing a traditional Platonic and Stoic moral assumption: that constancy (whether defined as steadfastness, as consistency, or as fidelity) is a divine attribute, and one which, if we can attain it, raises us above human imperfection and worldly mutability towards the perfection of God. This is the central assumption of Stoic ethics: explicit in Seneca's idea of constantia sapientis, the immovable and unchanging strength of mind that comes from Stoic wisdom; implied more distantly in Cicero's idea of decorum, the principle of cosmic order which is reflected in the appropriateness and consistency of human behaviour.

Proteus' aphorism may be taken to state a central theme of Shakespeare's Roman plays: can man become perfect by becoming constant? It is a question on which Shakespeare's own attitude is divided. On the one hand, his Ovidian preoccupation with time and mutability, and his horror of human inconstancy (treachery, ingratitude), make him attracted to an ideal of permanence. On the other hand, he dislikes Stoic pride and rigidity, and in several plays deals comically (Love's Labour's Lost) or

tragically (Measure for Measure) with the folly and self-deception of trying to achieve a more-than-human perfection. Shakespeare's treatment of the theme of constancy, though he may well have been drawn to it in reaction to the Neostoic writings of the 1590s, is (in Yeats's formula) not a quarrel with others, but a quarrel with himself.

It is not surprising that Shakespeare associates constancy with Rome: the two most influential writers on the theme were Romans, Stoicism was a Roman philosophy, constancy a traditionally Roman virtue, Rome itself almost a symbol of permanence. More fundamentally, Shakespeare sees the peculiar relevance of Proteus' aphorism to Rome as a pagan and secular society. Rome embraces the ideal of constancy as one which provides stability and certainty in a world which is mutable and uncertain, and which promises that men can attain godlike perfection by their own virtue in this world.

Along with this aspiration to perfection, however, there is another strain in the Roman ideal of constancy: one of externality and preoccupation with appearances and opinions. The tension between these two strains, aspiration and externality, is inherent in Brutus' formula: "untir'd spirits and formal constancy." I have associated the two halves of the line with the two forms of the constancy ideal: "untir'd spirits" with Senecan Stoicism (virtue as godlike constancy), "formal constancy" with Ciceronian decorum (virtue as role-playing). More subtly, however, both the Senecan and Ciceronian ideals contain their own tensions between aspiration and externality: Cicero's decorum can be interpreted not as public role-playing but as the pursuit of truth to oneself, while Seneca's heroic ethic contains a strong element of theatricality. Inherent in Stoicism is a vitiating concern for that "opinion" which, in Stoic theory, is the enemy of constancy and virtue; and this flaw is one to which Rome's "public temper" is particularly liable. Thus, through all the

manifestations of Roman constancy - heroic valour, rational self-control, consistency of behaviour, Stoic endurance and suicide - runs a contradiction between the striving to be perfect through constancy, and the striving to appear constant.

Shakespeare's judgement of Roman constancy is similar to (or influenced by) Montaigne's. In the course of a twenty-year preoccupation with the question, Montaigne concludes that the ideal of perfection through constancy, though "a profitable desire," is "likewise absurd": incompatible with the deep-rooted inconstancy of the world and human nature, self-contradictory in itself, and (in the end) less desirable than an ideal based upon flexibility, self-knowledge, and nature. Shakespeare, judging by similar standards, sees the Roman ethic of constancy as unnatural and deficient in self-knowledge. To strive to appear constant is to ignore the contradictory realities of human nature and substitute an external image for self-knowledge; to strive for actual perfection through constancy is to fail to recognise the inherent limitations of humanity, and so commit oneself to either failure or pretence.

These judgements are implied most clearly in Julius Caesar, in which a Roman virtue blended of Stoicism and decorous role-playing is shown to be essentially a "formal constancy": an attempt to attain, or at least imitate, an impossible perfection and consistency through self-deception and pretence. The two later tragedies develop the theme in extreme directions. Coriolanus takes a hero for whom the pursuit of constancy (in reality rather than form) is a moral absolute, and through his tragic experience exposes the self-destructive contradictions of the ideal: Coriolanus attains a kind of perfection, but a kind which is unnatural and inhuman, destructive to his society and himself, and which he must finally abandon in bowing to the demands of nature.

The protagonists of Antony and Cleopatra, by contrast, in a world

dominated by mutability, reject the ideal of constancy and instead pursue their own kind of perfection through a Montaigne-like ideal of variety and inconstancy. Antony's inconstancy proves as self-destructive as Coriolanus' constancy; but Cleopatra attains an ambiguous and paradoxical triumph, reconciling in death the perfections of constancy and mutability.

Shakespeare's exploration of constancy in the Roman plays ends (whether one takes Antony or Coriolanus as its ending) with no simple resolution of its moral problems. The Roman ideal of constancy is noble in its own way, and appeals to the human desire for stability and certainty, yet its inadequacies as a moral absolute are clearly demonstrated. The ideal of inconstancy appeals perhaps even more strongly to our desire for variety and richness of experience, but provides no surer moral ground. And Cleopatra's fusion of the two values, though aesthetically wholly satisfying, is inimitable. It is perhaps a problem which cannot be resolved - at least, not within the wholly secular world which Shakespeare's Romans inhabit.