My title invokes an old scholarly topic, one whose venerability and general aura of dustiness do not prevent the periodic conviction that there is more, even much more to be looked into here. The recent Arden editions of Shakespeare's Richard III and, surprisingly, A Midsummer Night's Dream have found appreciably more room for Seneca in their commentary than those plays have known before,¹ and the whole area of Elizabethan Senecanism has recently been certified a Research Opportunity in Renaissance Drama.² The broader European field has received a dauntingly broad compilation whose separate chapters on Seneca's influence on Dutch, Scandinavian, and Slavic theater figure in a general sense that available scholarship on the question has been woefully tentative and unthorough.³ Yet alongside such continuing efforts we have also had developing, especially in the study of English and Spanish drama, a fairly sophisticated

* A version of this paper was presented at a conference on “Classical Traditions in Shakespeare and the Renaissance” at the University of Minnesota, April 1982. Many of the general arguments are developed more fully in my forthcoming book, Anger's Privilege: Renaissance Tragedy and the Senecan Tradition.


³ Der Einfluss Senecas auf das europäische Drama, ed. Eckard Lefèvre (Darmstadt 1978).
conviction that the whole question of Senecan influence is just possibly a ghost topic generated by the predispositions of the researchers, and if not that, at the very most a tertiary matter, of very little importance as far as our real interest in Renaissance drama and its development is concerned. That case for English has best been put by G. K. Hunter, whose article on “Seneca and the Elizabethans” has become a classic statement: “If Seneca’s tragedies had not survived, some details [in the history of Elizabethan drama] would have had to be changed — but the over-all picture would not have been altered.”

Between these two traditions there has not been much in the way of contact and dialogue, so that the matter cannot really be said to have been decided; but one may have the impression that the better minds among working scholars tend to find Hunter’s stand by far the more sensible.

As things are now, so do I; and though I would probably in the long run dissent from Hunter’s conclusion as just quoted, I am not sure I would, at least insofar as it concerns claims that Elizabethan dramatists had in any significant numbers actually read Seneca’s tragedies themselves, whether in Latin or in translation, and that their dramatic craft was specifically altered by that experience. Those plays for which one can credibly make such a claim — Gorboduc, Gismond of Salerne, The Misfortunes of Arthur — are, dramaturgically, dead ends, while the “Senecan” moments in the plays that do count are brief sententiae or local rhetorical flourishes whose presence is far more convincingly explained by reference to a rather different kind of “classical influence.” Most practicing Renaissance writers, we are now aware, had much of their contact with classical literature through commonplace books and rhetorical manuals in which a very wide and confused mixture of Greek and Latin writers was digested into isolated sentiments and tricks of phrase. By way of this tradition, a Renaissance writer could easily produce “Senecan” passages in his text without ever having read Seneca, let alone intending some meaningful allusion to the original context — could produce “Senecan” passages in the same unconcerned way in which he could, without any sense of incongruity, produce Horatian or Ovidian or Valerio-Flaccan passages.

in the same paragraph. I am quite willing to concede that most of the apparent "Senecanism" in Elizabethan drama — and a good deal of the "Senecanism" even in the more self-consciously neoclassical continental theater — comes by this relatively anonymous route.

Nevertheless, I still want to argue that we do not entirely need to put quotation marks around Senecanism when talking about it: that we are still dealing with a specific and recognizable factor in the drama of the time that it makes sense to link with Seneca's name, and also that that factor is one to be seriously reckoned with in our general understanding of Renaissance tragedy. T. S. Eliot, of course, made a similar claim over fifty years ago in "Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca," a famous essay but one whose suggestions have never been seriously followed up. That is unfortunate, I think, because Eliot is asking the right kinds of questions about this topic, questions in the face of which arguments such as Hunter's are not wrong, exactly, but certainly conceived with misleading narrowness. That is the tradition of discussion we have needed and not had; what I want to sketch here is a possible updating of Eliot's case. Like him, I am concerned not just with Stoicism, but also with the relations between Stoicism and a certain kind of dramatic speech. Consider, for instance, Lady Macbeth:

Come thick Night,
And pall thee in the dunnest smoake of Hell,
That my keene Knife see not the Wound it makes,
Nor Heaven peepe through the Blanket of the darke,
To cry, hold, hold.

Macbeth 1. 5. 50-54

This is not an isolated conceit; her husband had in the previous scene called in a similar way for the lights of heaven to avert their eyes:

Starres hide your fires,
Let not Light see my black and deepe desires . . .
1. 4. 50-51

And later, when he anticipates the murder of Banquo:

Come, seeing Night,
Skarfe up the tender Eye of pittifull Day . . .


6 I quote Shakespeare, with minor adjustments, from The First Folio of Shakespeare: The Norton Facsimile, ed. Charlton Hinman (New York 1968); line numbers are from The Riverside Shakespeare, ed. G. Blakemore Evans et al. (Boston 1974).
And it is part of the mood of the whole play that these appeals are in a rather literal way answered. "There's Husbandry in Heaven," Banquo had observed ominously before the murder of Duncan, "Their Candles are all out" (2. 1. 4-5); and after the murder we hear from Rosse:

Thou seest the Heavens, as troubled with mans Act,
Threatens his bloody Stage: by th' Clock 'tis Day,
And yet darke Night strangles the travailing Lampe:
Is't Nights predominance, or the Dayes shame,
That Darknesse does the face of Earth intombe,
When living Light should kisse it?

"'Tis unnaturall," the Old Man replies, "Even like the deed that's done" (2. 4. 5-11). This is all said, of course, with unmistakably Shakespearean flair; but what is being said is at base nothing more than standard Elizabethan theatrics. If we feel pressed to look for sources, we need go no further than the general bag of rhetorical tricks making the rounds among Shakespeare's colleagues; under Lady Macbeth's speech, for instance, Muir cites Anthony Munday:

Muffle the eye of day,
Ye gloomie clouds (and darker than my deedes, 
That darker be than pitchie sable night)
Muster together on these high topt trees,
That not a sparke of light thorough their sprayes,
May hinder what I meane to execute.

1 Robin Hood 14/2387-92

But it is not hard to find other examples, or to see such speeches as elaborations of a hyperbole that had been second nature to English dramatic speech since the 1580s:

Weepe heavens, and vanish into liquid teares,
Fal starres that governe his nativity,
And sommon al the shining lamps of heaven
To cast their bootlesse fires to the earth,
And shed their feble influence in the aire.
Muffle your beauties with eternall clowdes . . .

Marlowe, 2 Tamburlaine 5. 3. 1-6

8 Quotations of Marlowe are from The Complete Works, ed. Fredson Bowers (Cambridge 1973).
That hyperbole informs what may well be the earliest line of Shakespeare's that we have — "Hung be the heavens with black, yield day to night" (1 Henry VI 1. 1. 1) — and typifies its milieu enough to supply the concluding cliché for Beerbohm's "'Savonarola' Brown": "In deference to this our double sorrow / Sun shall not shine today nor shine to-morrow. — Sun drops quickly back behind eastern horizon, leaving a great darkness on which the Curtain slowly falls." As far as immediate genetics are concerned for a play like Macbeth, we have no particular reason to invoke Seneca; and indeed, none of the passages just quoted are usually so annotated.

Still, there it is:

non ibo in hostes? manibus excutiam faces
caeloque lucem — spectat hoc nostri sator
Sol generis, et spectatur, et curru insidens
per solita puri spatio decurrit poli?
non redit in ortus et remetitur diem?

Seneca, Medea 27-31

Shall I not go against my enemies? I shall shake torches from their hands and the light from heaven. Does the Sun, father of my race, see this, and is he still seen, and sitting in his chariot does he travel his accustomed route through the pure heavens? Does he not return to his rising and take back the day?

So Seneca's Medea, using one of the most common topics of Seneca's own dramatic rhetoric. It can be paralleled in a dozen places in the Senecan corpus; and in what I would argue is Seneca's best single work, Thyestes, the memorable final action includes a striking literalization of such an appeal:

Quo terrarum superumque pares,
cuius ad ortus noctis opace
decus omne fugit, quo uertis iter
medioque diem perdis Olympos?

Thyestes 789-92

Where, father of lands and gods, at whose rising all the splendor of dark night flies, where do you turn your course and destroy the day at noon?

The crime of Atreus has driven all the lights from heaven, and brought on what might as well be the end of the world:

10 The Latin for Seneca's plays is taken from L. Annaei Senecae Tragoediae, ed. Giancarlo Giardina (Bologna 1966), with some typographical adjustments; translations are my own.
solitae mundi periere uices:
nihil occasus, nihil ortus erit.

... non succedunt
astra, nec ullo micat igne polus,
non Luna graues digerit umbras.

... in nos aetas
ultima uenit? o nos dura
sorte creatos, seu perdidimus
solem miseri, siue expulimus!

The accustomed cycles of the universe have ended. There will be no more setting and rising. ... No stars return and the sky sparkles with no fire, the moon does not dispel the deep shadows. ... Has the last age come upon us? Oh, we were born to a harsh fate, whether, wretched, we have lost the sun, or whether we have driven him out!

If, for one thing, we conceive of dramatic Senecanism in terms of this kind of hyperbolic rhetoric, the catalogue of Elizabethan Senecan moments immediately becomes much larger than most studies have argued it to be; such moments are everywhere. I pick only one topic out of several for which similar examples can be produced; we may speak here not just of muffling the heavens, but more generally of a cataclysmic rhetorical disruption of external reality in response to the feelings and actions of the speaker:

Fall heaven, and hide my shame, gape earth, rise sea,
Swallow, overwhelme me . . .
Chettle, Hoffman 5. 1/2066-67

Chettle might well be translating and elaborating Seneca’s recurring “dehisce tellus” (Phaedra 1238, Troades 519, Oedipus 868); but such speech is almost wholly naturalized on the Elizabethan stage, to the point where it usually is not noticed as something that needs to be accounted for. Yet just that pervasiveness, I think, argues for the significant presence of Seneca in the background of Elizabethan dramatic rhetoric: probably not, I admit, by purposeful readings in Seneca by the important dramatists of the day, and certainly not without an admixture, in the general anonymity of the rhetorical tradition, of other, non-Senecan elements of a similar type (the Bible, for instance, is a particularly rich source for the rhetoric of disrupt-

11 Henry Chettle, The Tragedy of Hoffman, ed. Harold Jenkins, Malone Society Reprints (Oxford 1951). Chettle may have made some contribution to Munday’s Robin Hood plays, though he is no longer usually cited as a full collaborator.
tion). But the question of specific sources grades here into a larger question. Whatever the particular route of their continuity, Senecan tragedy and Elizabethan tragedy are bound together by the fact that such speech as I have been quoting is natural to them; and the study of Senecan tragedy impinges on our study of Elizabethan tragedy most significantly when it helps us to answer the question: What kind of drama is it in which people can get away with talking like this? They have not been able to get away with it too successfully since the Renaissance; we are concerned here with the kind of high Elizabethan fustian that dramatists from Dryden on imitate only with great caution, and usually with considerable irony and amusement (witness Beerbohm). To say that dramatic conventions have simply changed evades the question of what those conventions themselves mean; and I think in this case they do mean something that a fresh understanding of Senecan tragedy can help us pin down.

For there is another bracket to be put up here. In Seneca himself, this rhetoric offers a significant point of contrast with Greek tragedy: a theater no less bold with words than Seneca's is, but in not quite the same way. Human crime there is very frequently dramatized as an almost physical affront to the outside world:

\[ \text{καὶ τῶτα δρᾶσασ' ἡλίων τε προσβλέπεις} \]
\[ \text{καὶ γαῖαν, ἔργον τλάσα δυσσεβεστατον...} \]

Euripides, Medea 1327-28

Even after doing these things you look on the sun and the earth, after daring a most unholy act!

Yet the onus in such talk on the Greek stage is with some consistency not on that exterior reality but on the human being who offends it; and what one cannot easily find in at least the Greek dramatic rhetoric we have is the wish or fantasy that the extra-human order should collapse in the presence of human outrage. Characters call to the earth and especially the sun for witness and possible vengeance —

\[ \text{ὁ γαῖα μὴτερ ἡλίων τ' ἀναπτυχαί,} \]
\[ \text{οἷων λόγων ἐρρητον αἰσχών' ὑπα.} \]

12 See, for instance, Marlowe's Doctor Faustus:

Mountaines and Hils, come, come, and fall on me,
And hide me from the heavy wrath of God.
No, no?
Then will I headlong run into the earth:
Gape earth; O no, it will not harbour me.
5. 2/1945-49

Dehisce tellus is here put on the same plane as what is clearly a borrowing from Revelation 6:16 (cf. Hosea 10:8, Luke 23:30).
Oh mother earth and expanse of sun, what unspeakable words I have heard.

— but not to hallucinate their disappearance:

omnis impulsus ruat
aether et atri nubibus condat diem,
ac uersa retro sidera obliquos agant
retorta cursus. tuque, sidereum caput,
radiate Titan, tu nefas stirpis tuae
speculare? lucem merge et in tenebras fuge.

Seneca, *Phaedra* 674-79

Let all the sky fall by force and bury the day in dark clouds, and let the stars turned around run a twisted course backwards. And you, great star, radiant Titan, do you see the crime of your offspring?

Drown your light and flee into the shadows.

No Greek *Thyestes* play has survived, but we have reason to think that even there heaven’s light was never seriously threatened. The sun of course was a powerfully literal presence in the Greek theater, while Senecan tragedy was very likely closet-drama, performed if at all in the shadows of indoors. But a more important difference also figures: Senecan dramatic rhetoric testifies, as Greek dramatic rhetoric does not, to a belief in the power of human evil to overawe or eclipse anything outside itself. Great crimes in Seneca characteristically prompt the gods not to vengeance, but rather to flee — to leave the criminal alone in his world. Guilt is the ultimate human weapon against the heavens.

Seneca’s greatest characters know that and act more confidently precisely in that knowledge. Their evil, their consciousness of that evil and their willingness to proclaim it, are part of their strength, a

13 The solar portent attested in the older Greek sources for the story is generally not that associated with the banquet, but the one by which Atreus had previously saved his throne from *Thyestes’* usurpation; the sun in this version does not flee in horror, but simply reverses its course as a sign from Zeus that Atreus is indeed the lawful king. See Euripides, *Electra* 698 ff., *Iphigenia in Tauris* 811 ff., *Orestes* 995 ff.: Plato, *Statesman* 268E-69A: Apollodorus, *Eptome* 2. 10-12. Two possible fragments from the *Thyestes* plays of Sophocles (Nauck\(^2\) 672) and Euripides (Nauck\(^2\) 861) appear to refer to this version also. Statilius Flaccus (*Palatine Anthology* 9. 98) and (less certainly) a Euripidean scholiast (on *Orestes* 812) have Sophocles using a version like Seneca’s, but in the absence of earlier evidence we may suspect them of assimilating the older work to what had by then become the usual, largely Roman telling. See *The Fragments of Sophocles*, ed. A. C. Pearson (Cambridge 1917), 1: 92-93 and 3: 5-6.

strength that Greek tragic characters neither have nor want. Even
the greatest villains of the Greek stage are deeply even if erringly
convinced of the correctness and justifiability of their course; Senecan
tragedy, in contrast, centers most memorably on characters who
embrace their villainy:

age, anime, fac quod nulla posteritas probet,
sed nulla taceat.

Thyestes 192-93

Come, soul, do what no future age may approve, but none may ignore.

So Atreus; Seneca's Medea says something similar (Medea 423-24).
By the end of their respective plays each has made good on that
boast. They are able to do so in great part because this very freedom
from moral compunction allows them to go further than any reason-
able person would expect; and we should perhaps best understand
their evil as a form of radical freedom from any external restraint
on individual will and action.

I think Senecan tragedy generally, despite its manifest deformities
and shortcomings, makes important sense when we take this impli-
cation of its rhetoric seriously. If Greek tragedy is the tragedy of the
failure of human will and pride in a moral universe that deals harshly
with them, Senecan tragedy is the tragedy of the success of the
human drive for moral and personal self-sufficiency, the drive for an
autonomous selfhood that is subject to no order beyond itself. At
their most genuinely harrowing, Seneca's tragedies reveal that very
success as a kind of horror. We can guess at some of the reasons for
Seneca's concern with that horror. The distance from Greek drama
to his is the distance from the intensely local and highly pluralistic
world of the Greek city-states to the far-flung, abstract rule of the
Roman empire; among other things, this new political arrangement
allowed one man to achieve something far closer to absolute power
than classical civilization had previously been able to offer. The great
drama of Seneca's time was that that very possibility was also the
possibility of limitless derangement; Seneca himself barely survived
the reign of Caligula and eventually succumbed to the savagery of
his pupil Nero. The principal resource in the face of such unchal-
lengeable madness was aristocratic Stoicism, the philosophy of militant
indifference to an external world over which one no longer has any
control: a philosophy of some genuine moral heroism, but also a
mirror-image of the imperial power against which it is set. "Imperare
sibi maximum imperium est" (Seneca, Epistulae 113. 31) — empire
over oneself is the greatest empire, but imperium remains the value
common to both emperor and Stoic. Both insist on absolute control; the one destroying whatever resists his conquest, the other surrendering all interest in whatever falls outside his power, they effectively divide the world between them. I think Senecan tragedy, dominated by versions of those two postures, is an exploration of their common ground: the self which will not deal with external reality except on terms of utter dominance.

I offer that formulation as a way of "placing" Senecan tragedy within the classical tradition, a way of defining what it does that Greek tragedy in comparison does not; and I hope that such a formulation can bestow on Senecan tragedy a sufficient sense of dignity and significance, of being about something worth our attention, that we can in turn think of the Senecan traces in Renaissance tragedy as being signs of an important Renaissance interest in a version of the same thing. To what extent, if any, Renaissance reading of the Senecan dramas themselves caused this interest is of far less moment than the common terrain itself, within which Renaissance dramatists would have a natural interest in the rhetorical style of Senecan tragedy, and would, however unknowingly, naturally seek out and reconstitute that style even from the homogenized scramble of the wider rhetorical tradition. The career of Renaissance individualism on the Renaissance stage is of course far more varied and in most of its range far more moderate than anything in the Senecan corpus; yet the character of that individualism is still such that at moments of extreme pressure, and indeed precisely in some of the landmark plays of the tradition, it seems both proper and essential for a character to say things like this:

Will all great Neptunes Ocean wash this blood
Clean from my Hand? no: this my Hand will rather
The multitudinous Seas incarnardine,
Making the Greene one Red.

Macbeth 2. 2. 57-60

These famous lines of Macbeth's have long been the showcase example of Shakespeare's Senecanism: the conceit looks very much as if it could have been assembled from two passages in Phaedra (551-52, 715-18) and one in Hercules Furens (1323-29). ¹⁵ But these were among

the most popular Senecan passages for use in dramatic declamation, and may be considered by Shakespeare's time to be already part of an international repertoire of rant:

Ah, quando mai la Tana, o 'l Reno, o 'l Istro,
o l'inospite mare, o 'l mar vermiglio,
o l'onde caspe, o l'oceano profondo,
potrian lavar occulto e 'ndegna colpa
che mi tinse e macchiò le membra e l'alma?
Tasso, Il Re Torrismondo 1.3/234-38\textsuperscript{16}

Ah, when could the Don, the Rhine, or the Danube, or the Unwelcoming Sea, or the Red Sea, or the Caspian waves, or the deep Ocean wash away that hidden and unworthy fault that stained and polluted my limbs and soul?

Muir once again cites Munday: "The multitudes of seas died red with blood" (2 Robin Hood 7/1391).\textsuperscript{17} We will justify a concern with Seneca here less by trying to pin down specific filiations than by thinking about what is being presented: the soul's tranced sensation that all external reality is crumpling before its power, that it is filling the whole world with its influence — a sensation whose megalomaniac thrill is inseparable from the panicky sense of suffocation that waits when that process is complete.

The story that plays itself out in Macbeth is, in Rossiter's words, that of "the passionate will-to-self-assertion, to unlimited selfhood, and especially the impulsion to force the world (and everything in it) to my pattern, in my time, and with my own hand."\textsuperscript{18} The witches tell Macbeth he will become king; his crime is that he cannot simply let it happen, but must make it happen by his own hand. The dynamic throughout is Macbeth's search for the decisive act, the one that will settle everything here and now:

If it were done, when 'tis done, then 'twer well
It were done quickly: If th'Assassination
Could trammell up the Consequence, and catch
With his surcease, Sucesse: that but this blow
Might be the be all, and the end all. Heere,
But heere, upon this Banke and Shoale of time,
Wee'ld jumpe the life to come.

What he finds of course at each step of the way is that something always slips through his grasp; yet his response is always simply to tighten his grasp, to berate himself for not having acted more quickly, more drastically, more decisively:

Time, thou anticipat'st my dread exploits:  
The flighty purpose never is o're-tooke  
Unlesse the deed go with it. From this moment,  
The very firstlings of my heart shall be  
The firstlings of my hand.  

4. 1. 144-48

Animating each such step is a radical fear of incompleteness. "Fleans is scap'd," his hired murderer tells him, prompting:

Then comes my Fit againe:  
I had else beene perfect;  
Whole as the Marble, founded as the Rocke,  
As broad, and generall, as the casing Ayre:  
But now I am cabin'd, crib'd, confin'd, bound in  
To sawcy doubts, and fears.  

3. 4. 20-24

"Then comes my Fit againe": the uncontrollable, recurrent rage that rises at any encounter with what is outside his power, outside himself — "I had else beene perfect."

The dynamic of much of this can be witnessed in Seneca as well. Here in particular my own ear picks up a rhyme with Seneca’s Medea: “perfectum est scelus” (Medea 986). The perfect crime is not the crime that is secret, but the crime that is done, its totality testifying to a union of will and action: “peracta uis est omnis” (843), all my power is now complete; “bene est, peractum est” (1019), it is good, it is completed. Macbeth’s attempts to rouse himself to such a pitch of decisiveness resonate with the strenuous efforts with which Seneca’s killers upbraid their own lethargy: “rumpe iam segnes moras,” Medea tells herself (54), now break off slothful delay; or Atreus:

Ignau, iners, eneruis et (quod maximum  
probrum tyranno rebus in summis reor)  
inulte, post tot scelera, post fratris dolos  
fasque omne ruptum questibus uanis agis  
iratus Atreus? . . .
Cowardly, idle, nerveless, and (what I think the greatest reproach to a tyrant in great affairs) unavenged, after so many crimes, after a brother’s deceit and all law broken, do you still make do with vain complaints, an angry Atreus? . . . Why do you stand in a daze? Begin, and summon up your spirits. Look on Tantalus and Pelops; to their examples my hands are called.

And in this arousal both are haunted by fears of their own laxity, the possibility that they might not be doing enough:

\[ uulnera \ et \ caedem \ et \ uagum \]
\[ funus \ per \ artus \ — \ leuia \ memoraui \ nimis: \]
\[ haec \ urig o \ feci; \ grauior \ exurgat \ dolor: \]
\[ maiora \ iam \ me \ scelera \ post \ partus \ decent. \]

\textit{Medea} 47-50

Wounds and slaughter and death working its way through the body — I have been remembering trivial things. These I did as a virgin. Let a grief now rise up in weightier guise; greater crimes are fitting after giving birth.

\[ uidit \ infandas \ domus \]
\[ Odrysia \ mensas \ — \ fateor, \ immane \ est \ scelus, \]
\[ sed \ occupatum: \ maius \ hoc \ aliquid \ dolor \ inueniat. \]

\textit{Thyestes} 272-75

The Thracian house has seen an unspeakable banquet — I admit that crime is great, but already done; let grief find something greater than this.

The destructive cycle thus spirals outward of its own logic to claim by the end something close to everything. The discovery that looms there is that to master life this way is to empty it.

We would probably want to say that Shakespeare is much more profound and clearer in showing that than Seneca is. Certainly that truth never comes home to Medea and Atreus as it does to Macbeth. The Senecan tragedies tend to end with still widening circles of conflagration reminiscent of the \textit{ecpyrōsis} of Stoic philosophy, but which we catch on are still essentially within the hero’s unchallenged fantasies of vindictive fulfillment. Senecan drama never quite steps outside those fantasies. Shakespeare’s play, on the other hand, never loses touch with the reality that ultimately resists and circumscribes
any one man's will: there is a world that will outlast Macbeth's rage, however total. We need such a world to make the emptiness of that rage fully visible. The contrast here is one that holds for almost all Renaissance drama, even that written in conscious imitation of Seneca: the Renaissance stage and the Renaissance imagination are more intractably populous than Seneca's, and always show the Senecan career playing itself out within some slightly larger, slightly tougher reality. Yet something like that career nevertheless remains, often quite memorably, the center of concern; and I would describe the results at best as, in effect, a meditation on the Senecan subject matter and its meaning, a meditation that precisely because it takes place in a fuller human context ends up telling us more about that subject matter than Seneca himself does. Macbeth is not, in any usual sense, an imitation of a Senecan play; but many of the reasons for saying that are also the reasons for saying that Macbeth is a high point, a moment of special fulfillment within the Senecan tradition. It is, I think, not hopelessly outrageous to say that Senecan tragedy unknowingly looks forward to the Renaissance for its articulation and completion. Thinking about Macbeth helps us understand Seneca.

Let me end with a more specific illustration of what I mean by that. Senecan tragedy, of course, takes almost all its stories from Greek tragedy, but within the choice of stories and the emphasis given to them we can detect somewhat elusive but still significant differences. In the family romances of Greek tragedy, the events that stand out most powerfully in the cultural memory tend to be the killing of parents: Oedipus, Electra, Orestes are among the most resonant names. All are characters at one point or another in Senecan tragedy; but in surveying the much smaller range of the Latin corpus, we may be struck by the particular prominence of stories about the killing of children. Seneca's three most famous and, in the long run, influential plays are in fact specifically about the killing or worse of children by their own parents: Hercules Furens, Medea, and most powerfully Thyestes. Things might look a little bit different if a Greek Thyestes had survived; but as it is, there is in the Western literary imagination no more characteristically Senecan topic than the Thyestean banquet, the father's devouring of his own offspring. What, if anything, might this mean?

It has long been noticed how the fear of children and the denial or perversion of parentage show up in the action and language of

Macbeth with special emphasis.\textsuperscript{20} Macbeth “ha’s no Children” (4. 3. 216), and fears “none of woman borne” (4. 1. 80). His wife has given suck, but would pluck the nipple from her child’s boneless gums and dash its brains out (1. 7. 54 ff.). It is the escape of Banquo’s son Fleance that brings on Macbeth’s “Fit again”; it is the later gratuitous killing of Macduff’s son that results from Macbeth’s vow to make the firstlings of his heart the firstlings of his hand, and that impresses us as Macbeth’s most viciously unnecessary single outrage; the only killing we see him perform in the final battle is of young Siward. “Pitty, like a naked New-born-Babe” (1. 7. 21), prompts the vengeance that Macbeth fears even before murdering Duncan; the vision of a “Bloody Childe” (4. 1. 76) later gives him equivocal comfort, but only seems to intensify his fear of possessing a “fruitlesse Crowne” and a “barren Scepter” (3. 1. 60-61), with no dynasty of his own to inherit them. In the context of the play as a whole, these scattered details seem to add up: Macbeth, as Swan puts it, “has refused the terms that time and mortality impose on him, and his refusal destroys him.”\textsuperscript{21} Children are a pledge of commitment to and faith in a future that comes from us but also ultimately escapes our control and indeed displaces us. The ongoing business of life becomes possible only through such commitments. Macbeth would extend his control even to time itself, would bring even the future under his absolute reign: “Wee’ld jumpe the life to come.” But to try that is to kill one’s children, to ensure one’s sterility; and it eventually comes home to Macbeth that all he has accomplished has been to empty the future of any meaningful human content:

To morrow, and to morrow, and to morrow,  
Creepes in this petty pace from day to day,  
To the last Syllable of Recorded time:  
And all our yesterdayes have lighted Fooles  
The way to dusty death.  
5. 5. 19-23

I would not want to commit myself on exactly where those babies


\textsuperscript{21} Jim Swan, “Happy Birthday, Bill Shakespeare!” unpublished essay. Gohlke draws a similar lesson: “To reject the conditions of weakness and dependence is to make oneself weak and dependent” (p. 158).
came to Shakespeare's play from; as far as classical precedent is concerned, his imagination may have been led less by Seneca than by the later conflation, very popular in Renaissance mythography, of Chronos, time, and Cronos, the Titan who ate his children. And for credible immediate sources, of course, we do not have to go to the classics at all; a strong Kindermord motif runs through Shakespeare's history plays, with the English chronicles behind them. But once in Shakespeare's play, the topic constitutes an effective interpretation of Senecan pedophagy, the discovery of a layer of significance not made clear in Seneca himself, but highly relevant in retrospect. The killing of parents in Greek tragedy is a catastrophic but also a natural and necessary process, an address to the past that is also a looking forward. The killing of children in Senecan tragedy is a purposeful killing of the future, an attempt literally to ingest the time to come — the ultimate act of the self's imperium to ensure that nothing will happen without its consent. But this of course eventually means ensuring that nothing more will ever happen; and in refusing to surrender to what will outlast it, the self also and inescapably guarantees its own more total and awful extinction. We may find such an extinction at the end of most of the emotional trajectories in Seneca's writing; the apocalyptic fury of the Senecan madman, after all, mirrors cosmically the ultimate heroic act of Seneca's philosophy: suicide. We view their bleak common terrain in Macbeth's pursuit of his own radical integrity — an annihilation both of himself and of all around him, a suicide of the soul.

University of Virginia

22 I owe this suggestion to my fellow conferee John Velz.