

The Neo-Stoic Revival in English Literature of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries: An Approach

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ABSTRACT

This paper stems from the belief on the importance of a historically-conscious literary criticism. From this perspective, the approach to literary texts of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in England cannot proceed by ignoring one of the most powerful, influential and complex philosophical constructs re-taken by Humanism from the classical period. Neo-Stoicism is a humanist version of classical Stoicism, and, together with other influential philosophical and ethical corpora such as Christianity, Neo-Platonism or Aristotelianism, constituted the backbone of Renaissance ethics. Yet (as a cursory look at most of the publications in the last decades will prove) much of the criticism on the literature of this period not only ignores the important role played by (Neo-)Stoicism, but fails to acknowledge its mere existence (with significative exceptions such as Profs. Schneider, Chew, and a few others). Consequently, in the following lines I will try to prove that Neo-Stoicism actually functioned as an extremely influential moving force in many representative works of the period, not only in prose writing (as we may suspect) but also in drama or poetry. Also, I will suggest that many of these works, far from smoothly incorporating Neo-Stoic doctrine, establish with it a complex and frequently conflicting dialogue that eventually engages in the main epistemological discussions of the period.

As most complex ideas, Stoicism has adapted to changing circumstances along history. If it is true that its ethical dimension basically embraces a highly theorized form of private morality, it also involves some reflections on politics and law, or, to put it differently, on the conceptualization and regulation of public behaviour; and this implies that it is relatively easy to find it underlying different ‘structures of feeling’, most notably during the

Renaissance and the Baroque.¹ Dealing with Stoic morals (as I will also do here), Professor Ben Schneider, to my knowledge one of the scholars that has best understood the relations between Stoicism and English Literature, maintains that Renaissance ethics were regulated by Stoicism (1993:113-14; 1995a:130-34). Other authors have also seen this, perhaps not as clearly and with such a penetrating insight as that of Prof. Schneider, but nevertheless leaving no doubt as to the actual importance of Stoicism, or Neo-Stoicism, in the English (and European) Renaissance.² However, today it seems that no direct connection is made between Stoicism and Renaissance literature, and consequently much of the moral, philosophical and political content of many Renaissance works is inevitably missed. The same can be said about later periods: I am persuaded that Stoicism can be rightfully claimed to have informed, under different guises, much of eighteenth century philosophy, basically the American and French Revolutions; nineteenth century Romanticism;³ and twentieth century Existentialism, to mention just a few major movements.⁴ In general terms, and before we proceed to more specific and detailed analysis, Stoicism, in its ethical dimension, can be characterized as a philosophy that believes that: (a) the 'soul' of the Universe is rational and benevolent; (b) absolute moral truth exists; (c) truth is available through common sense; and (d) life is fully realized through obedience to the (unwritten) moral law. But although this array of beliefs may seem not difficult to identify and Stoicism, consequently, would be easily traceable in both literary or non-literary works, the truth is that it is seldom found in isolation or in plenitude (that is, taking into account all four main beliefs) but, quite on the contrary, overlapped with some other equally influential codes of moral behaviour, namely, Christianity, Aristotelianism, Epicureanism and/or Neo-Platonism. It is precisely to this mixture of Stoic ideas with Christian, Neo-Platonic, Aristotelian and Epicurean notions in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that we commonly refer as Neo-Stoicism.⁵ But we also find that Stoic thought rarely

¹ I borrow this term, now familiar, from the British sociologist Raymond Williams (1980: 22-7).

² See Sonnenschein (1923), Bolgar (1954), Eckhoff (1957), Henderson (1961), Waith (1962), Allen (1964), Kelso (1964), Miner (1970), Bement (1972), Kristeller (1979), Ide (1980), Montsarrat (1984), Chew (1988), Ferrater (1994), and Alvis (1990).

³ In fact, Stoicism is clearly behind Matthew Arnold's central Kantian concept of 'Hebraism', which he opposes to 'Hellenism' as one of the two dimensions of Western aesthetic thought in his influential *Culture and Anarchy* (Arnold 1960-74:163-75).

⁴ Audrey Chew has provided an account of some of these and other influences; see Chew (1988:1-7).

⁵ *Neo-Stoicism* is the term employed to refer to the renewed Stoic ideas appearing during the European Renaissance (ie, fifteenth to seventeenth centuries), initially in Spain and Italy, and

was able to establish itself as the *grand recit* it aspired to, as many of the textual evidences we will show prove; this does not mean, however, that its importance or influence was not paramount in this period, but simply that Stoicism did not succeed in its attempt to suppress all other systems of thought, which modified it in different degrees. In this sense (and for basically the same reasons) it is equally difficult to establish a neat chronological classification of Stoicism, although it seems to be necessary in order to be able to cope with the different connotations of this philosophy, as well as to understand how these contents negotiate diverse meanings to eventually produce specific versions of Neo-Stoic thought. Thus we traditionally distinguish between primitive and historical Stoicism, or, using other terms, between early and older Stoicism on the one hand, and middle, late and younger Stoicism on the other. To put it bluntly, and before we go any further, primitive Stoicism has to do with the typical and easily-recognizable Stoic moral self-sufficiency whereas historical Stoicism deals with the notion of self-discipline as a social duty. Stoicism then has, we must not forget, both a private and a public dimension, and this will prove of the greatest importance in our later discussion.

Primitive Stoicism, or Stoicism as a whole, starts with Zeno of Citium (4th-3rd c. BC), who in his lessons in the Stoa ('porch') of his Academy in Athens was able to mix elements from Socrates, Heraclitus and the Cynics mainly to produce a new formulation which could cope with a changing world; in fact, the most coherent explanation of the origins of Stoicism and, most specifically, of the individualistic nature of these first theories explains that it appeared as "a response to the disruptions of familiar values that accompanied the breakdown of the Greek city state" (Chew 1988:2). In a very general overview, Stoicism is based on a physical theory of existence as an ever-repeating cycle in which everything is composed of the four elements (fire, water, earth, and air) which, after turning into one another, at the end of the so called 'Platonic year' are consumed by the primary element, namely, intellectual fire or ether. This recurring cyclic structure implies, most significantly, that progress is not possible: the accumulation of wealth or fame loses then all its importance. Besides, Stoics conceptualize

later in England, France or Germany. Neo-Stoicism then acquires new contents, mainly from humanism (Erasmus, Vives, Juan and Alfonso de Valdés, More, Montaigne, Valla, Ficino etc...), and constitutes the backbone of Renaissance ethics. However, we must distinguish between Stoic doctrines and Stoic attitudes, and, besides, we must note that some authors (notably Schneider) deny the existence of something that we can distinctly define as Neo-Stoicism and which is different from classical Stoicism.

a principle that holds everything together, and this principle will dominate every version of Stoicism in the next two thousand years, although it will receive different denominations: “intellectual fire, pneuma, reason, the will of god, god, fate, destiny, providence, universal law, nature, reason of the world, soul of the world, Jupiter, Zeus, ether, atmospheric current” (Chew 1988:4; Monsarrat 1984:9-21).

For Stoics, God and the Law cannot part, so acquiescence to the way things are is enforced by means of acceptance of the eternal law, the Stoic law of nature, and contemplation of the pre-ordained plan and the one virtue, reason. The Universe is governed by a set of rules rooted in nature which can only be known if man lives ‘naturally’, that is, if he lives in cooperation with the whole cosmological system. Other Stoic characteristics, such as unconventionality, simplicity of life and the setting up of heroes, characteristics which came to be immediately associated with the standard Stoic of the popular lore, were inherited from the Cynics.

The second brand of Stoicism, historical Stoicism, is especially relevant for our discussion since it is this Roman version of the philosophical school the one most commonly integrated within sixteenth and seventeenth century texts, and it is distinctly different from primitive Stoicism. In fact, Stoicism went through a deep transformation that produced a new awareness of the role of the individual within the cosmic plan, and this was the consequence of a new reading of Aristotle which produced Cicero’s reflections on civility, especially his *Officiis*, better known in the English sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as *On Duty* (Chew 1988:6-8). This came hand in hand with a general softening of Stoic exigencies, which could be clearly perceived in the new emphasis on brotherly love:

Whereas the Old Stoa considered wisdom, moderation, and courage to be virtues in respect to the individual himself and summed up his duties to others as justice, the younger Stoics emphasized the virtue of philanthropy, or humanitas, as the truly altruistic virtue. (Edelstein 1966:90).

This change in focus, from the individual to the community, made it difficult for ordinary readers of the Renaissance to identify with some degree of certainty Stoic arguments when they found them, and hence the varying and ambiguous Renaissance representations of pseudo-Stoic commonplaces, including virtue, villains, and heroes. As I have just pointed out, most relevant were Cicero’s *De Officiis* and *De Finibus Bonorum et Malorum*, which spread the notion of the good man as a public servant, or, in other words, turned

self-sufficiency into self-sacrifice, a transformation of the utmost relevance (Cicero 1928:I.22; 1914:III.28). Stoic ideas about the individual's part in the cosmic plan joined Aristotelian concepts (manifested in his *Eudemian* and, especially, his *Nicomachean Ethics*) about man as a social and political entity (Aristotle 1940:IX,1097b,11, and 1162a,17) and about the whole being superior to the part, which eventually brought about the modification of the notion of 'Stoic virtue' to mean now in the Roman period "civilized patriotic cooperation", something that was later to become common in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (Chew 1988:8); consequently, 'being natural' now is a synonym for 'being civilized'. The relevance of this intellectual shift cannot pass unnoticed, since its immediate consequences were enormous not just for literary production but for the whole structure of feeling of those and subsequent centuries. If, as I have just pointed out, 'living according to nature' is equated with 'living according to society's dictum', we also find that one's own 'conscience' is related to one's country, and consequently 'duty' means now playing out our role in the system, 'fate' participates in the maintaining of the *status quo*, and the question of 'truth' is associated with the *consensum gentium*: in other words, and as I have just suggested, self-sufficiency turns into self-sacrifice. An alternative solution is left for those cases in which this 'agreement of the people' goes against a certain author's opinion: it is then taken into consideration that it may have been corrupted, and this means that it is time for a Stoic hero, a saviour of the community, to appear and act. In any case, the Aristotelian rule of the 'golden mean' is included in order to soften Stoic absolutist (or extremist) temptations (Arnold 1958:108-10; Chew 1988:1-11).

From all these additions, the resulting Stoic picture would be one which contemplates three recurring Stoic themes, and these in turn will become key concepts in many sixteenth and seventeenth century literary and non-literary works. The three predominant themes are those of *peace of mind*, the *law of nature* and *the wise (or happy) man*, or, in other words, the happy life on Earth, the life of social duty, and the ideal man, all considered, obviously, from a Neo-Stoic perspective (Chew 1988:44-53; 72). *Peace of mind* implies adapting to adverse circumstances, making virtue of necessity, and this by means of a technique of passive resignation. This includes internalizing the belief that all fortune is good fortune, and that only virtue (that is, accepting what may come with glee) can eventually make you free; restraint is preached especially with relation to the passions, which have to be necessarily controlled although there is some doubt in relation to the necessary degree of restraint to be practised: then, passions

have to be either eliminated (as the early Stoics advocated) or simply regulated to adapt to the ‘golden mean’ rule (Aristotle and Seneca). All these practices eventually lead man to the acquisition of peace of mind, an attitude more than an activity, as Lucretius, Seneca, and, most clearly, Boethius, exemplified (Boethius 1973). The *law of nature* demands that we do our duty (and we have seen what duty means in this context), and that all our direct actions be in accordance with the hierarchical system (that is, the *status quo*) and reason. The *law of nature*, then, embodies the same attitude as our previous topic (it could not be otherwise) although with a technique, now, of active cooperation. This implies a life of social activity, and this is promoted by Aristotle and, above all, Cicero.⁶ Finally, the *wise man* is the one who lives according to the law of nature and acquires, thus, peace of mind on Earth. To do this, he has to be virtuous (in the Stoic sense of resignation and integration within the system) and plain (or ‘stoic’, in the modern sense of the word).

With all these elements in mind, it seems easier to have a clear idea of the complexity and also ambiguity of the concept that, under the heading ‘Stoicism’, influenced so many texts as a major moral concern. This complexity can also be perceived in the diversity of sources of Stoic thought in England until the late seventeenth century: undoubtedly, the most important are Boethius’ *Consolation* (in Queen Elizabeth’s translation); Stoic ideas Christianized by Paul, Augustine, and Aquinas; Stoic authors, mainly Virgil, Horace, Cicero, Seneca, Plutarch, and Marcus Aurelius, either directly or through Boethius’ translation and/or reference; the repository of quotations filtered by Dante, Petrarch, Boccaccio, Erasmus, Guevara and Montaigne; and finally Justus Lipsius on constancy in John Stradling’s sixteenth century translation.⁷

⁶ Cicero is in fact instrumental in adapting early Stoicism by means of a blend of Panaetian and Aristotelian elements which produced the so-called Christian Stoicism; this is the source of Renaissance conduct books, as we will see, most notably Elyot’s *Gouernour* and Erasmus’ *Education*. In a nutshell, what Cicero introduces with great success is the concept of social duty, which is (for obvious reasons) well received in certain circles of power (Atkins 1943: 60 *et ff.*).

⁷ Surprisingly enough, Guevara was a more influential Spanish source of Stoic (and Humanist) thought in the English Renaissance than Vives or the brothers Juan and Alfonso de Valdés. In fact, Ramón Díaz-Solís has strongly claimed that Guevara’s *Familiar Letters* (which appeared in English translated directly from Spanish as early as 1546) could be the book Prince Hamlet enigmatically reads in act two scene two, and about which he exchanges some ideas with Polonius on old age. Both Guevara and Shakespeare would be following some ideas previously exposed by Juvenal (Díaz-Solís 1990).

All these different sources, some more faithful than others to the original concepts, contributed, at the same time as they disseminated several valuable Stoic ideas, to produce and popularize certain misconceptions that explain many of the prejudices of the age about Stoicism. The truth is that although central Stoic notions were smoothly assimilated and became part of the current structure of feeling, certain prejudices against the actual terms 'Stoicism' and 'Stoics' can be easily perceived, especially among those authors who explicitly rejected Stoicism at the same time as they incorporated Stoic ideas in their works. It is the case, for example, of Joseph Hall's injunction: "I will not be a Stoic, to have no passions, (...) but a Christian, to order those I have" (Chew 1988:75), where the 'English Seneca' is clearly ignoring that Roman Stoics (or Neo-Stoics, for that matter) do not stand against passions but against excessive passion, and that the Christian ordering of his passions that Hall precisely claims he has is, paradoxically, very close to the Neo-Stoic Aristotelian 'golden mean' rule. The playwright George Chapman, for his part, carefully distinguishes between true Stoic retirement, what Richard Ide qualifies as "a heroic enterprise in its own way", and another—easier—kind of retirement which is presented as a "final haven" or a "place of solace" (Ide 1980:79). In general terms, during our period of study a Stoic was, for the cultivated gentleman, just an atheist afflicted with pride in his own moral self-sufficiency and his emotional imperturbability. Literary representations of the Stoic were equally influenced by this perverted and misinformed stereotyping: s/he was either a dangerous villain or a ridiculous hypocrite. In the first case, this villain's pretensions of imperturbability, equanimity, and virtuosity were but the masks s/he was wearing in order to deceive her/his opponents; the second was more of a mock figure: the supposed Stoic was proved a fool as soon as problems arose, and thus s/he will appear as afflicted by childish fears, doubts, partiality and selfishness. If this second figure was inoffensive and full of pathos, the first one proved dangerous to the system, a social climber, and hence the generalized mistrust towards Stoics.⁸

All in all, Stoic figures and themes abound in English literature of the period, and precisely these misconceptions and falsifications of the real

⁸ These misconceptions were, themselves, productive indeed, as the following two dramatic figures prove: the Stoic Machiavel and the Stoic Malcontent; the former, much more dangerous and destructive than the latter, is characterized by his godlike self-sufficiency and his lack of emotions; the Malcontent is but an idealist, embittered and frustrated by the discrepancy between what things are and what they, in his opinion, should be.

message of Stoicism, by showing a serious concern with this moral philosophy, witness to its real importance. Thus, and very generally, we can find miscellaneous Stoic moralizing (high places are dangerous, misfortune is but a state of mind); references to the Stoic peace of mind (lost by those who are slaves to passion); fate (generally optimistic and apparently capricious); or the heroic figure (goodness brings freedom, death is better than loss of integrity). But of all the topics developed throughout the history of Stoicism there are three key concepts which appear in sixteenth and seventeenth century literary and non-literary works to such an extent that they constitute the moral backbone of these texts: peace of mind, the law of nature, and the wise (or happy) man; in other words, the happy life on Earth, the life of social duty, and the ideal man (Chew 1988:44-53; 72).

Peace of mind is the goal of all Stoic thought, and it occupies an important place in literary texts of some Stoic orientation. Its importance lies on the fact that it is the only way to achieve happiness, again a concept that acquires a special meaning within the realm of Stoicism. Happiness (or 'private happiness') is not related to 'good fortune' at all; it rather points towards the most easily recognizable notions of Christian patience or Stoic resignation and, in short, it stems from virtue, although it would probably be better to say that virtue, the sole good, is the only source of happiness (Monsarrat 1984:7-8; 11-12). Happiness is 'wanting what we get', being indifferent to everything except virtue and vice, and believing, with Hamlet, that "There is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so" (II,ii,244-45)⁹ (Chew 1988:107). In general, prose writing of this period tends to elaborate a recipe fit to obtain, as Joseph Hall would put it, 'heaven upon Earth', stressing with Robert Burton in his *Anatomy of Melancholy* that "what can't be cured must be endured" (Burton 1948:527).

The first step in the acquisition of peace of mind is to avoid anger. Considered as a passion, we must remember that the Neo-Stoic attitude was to reject it in excess, but it could be accepted if the 'golden mean' was respected, and thus Hall, in his *Heaven Upon Earth and Characters of Vertues and Vices* even criticized "want of anger" in certain circumstances (Hall 1948:437). However, it is easier to find strong injunctions against anger together with apocalyptic descriptions of its consequences, as in the following excerpt from Robert Burton:

⁹ All references to Shakespeare are taken from *The Norton Shakespeare*, edited by Stephen Greenblatt.

They [the angry] are void of reason, inexorable, blind, like beasts & monsters for the time, say and do not know what, curse, swear, rail, fight, and what not? How can a mad man do more? (Burton 1948:234).

Burton's final equation of the angry and the mad takes us smoothly to Shakespeare's Lear's sudden fury at Cordelia and his anger, which is equated to the wrath of a dragon, so close to madness (I,i,108-88; esp.122); and also to Thomas Heywood's Charles Mountford, who pleads temporary insanity caused by excessive anger in order to excuse his murder in *A Woman Killed with Kindness* (I,iii,50-51).

To avoid grief is the second purpose of the Stoic in order to achieve peace of mind. Seneca's plays, so influential in the English Renaissance, were about members of the aristocracy who ruined their lives for excessive grief, and this motive can be followed in several works of the period. Burton also had much to say in his *Anatomy of Melancholy* about this: "comfort thyself with other men's misfortunes" (1948:495). But it is Shakespeare who clearly retakes this Senecan idea. Gonzalo claims in *The Tempest* that they were lucky they only shipwrecked and not drowned (II,i,1-9); Romeo and Timon are heroes condemned because they are always either too high or too low; Hamlet's obstinate grief is criticized by everybody—especially King Claudius—(I,ii,87-107) on the basis that it (excessive grief) is against Heaven, Nature, common sense and manliness ("unmanly grief" -I,ii,94); and *Othello's* Brabantio claims that excessive grief cannibalizes the one in pain. But it is the Duke of Venice in *Othello* the one that makes the Neo-Stoic case against grief clearest, advising, as a perfect Stoic, in a Senecan manner:

When remedies are past, the griefs are ended
By seeing the worst which late on hopes depended.
To mourn a mischief that is past and gone
Is the next way to draw new mischief on.
What cannot be preserved when fortune takes,
Patience her injury a mockery makes.
The robbed that smiles steals something from the thief;
He robs himself that spends a bootless grief. (I,iii,201-08)

It must be noted that these clearly Stoic speeches in *Hamlet* and *Othello* are uttered by characters (King Claudius, and the Duke of Venice) with spurious hidden intentions: to make Hamlet forget about the death (actually, assassination) of his father, and to avoid a punitive action against Othello,

at the moment the sole man on whom the security of Venice rested. This seems to point at the ambiguous consideration of Stoic wisdom: reputed as philosophically sound, but somehow connected with evildoing.

The control of desire is probably the most underdeveloped of all Stoic warnings connected with peace of mind, and probably the reason was that it had to fight the long established tradition of medieval romantic love. Yet, we can easily find references to the disastrous consequences of this most un-Stoic of passions, and thus Shakespeare's Romeo or John Ford's incestuous Giovanni in the dark *'Tis Pity She's a Whore* are driven to destruction.

Since the objective was to achieve peace of mind, and grief, anger and desire were to be avoided, it is no surprise that continuous references to simple life are followed by allusions to retirement. In this sense we must remember some of the notes previously presented: the social dimension of Neo-Stoicism explicitly rejects retirement as an acceptable attitude for the good Stoic, since it implies abandoning responsibilities. Shakespeare's Caliban, Lear and, as we saw above, Marston's initially alienated Bussy, clearly failed when they decided to retire from public life, and all three plays clearly tell us so; the reason for this failure was, as I suggested, that the retirement advocated by Neo-Stoicism entails a disciplined attitude clearly distant from the accommodated alienation of Bussy and Lear, or the excessively scholarly passion of Caliban. In effect, the "uneasy lies the head that wears a crown" theme (*2Henry IV*, III,i,31) offers a display of kings who, more or less rhetorically, make it clear that their peace of mind will have to consider a different concept of simple life from that of retirement (*3Henry VI* -II,v; *Henry V* -IV,i,212-66). The superiority of the peasant's life must not be taken at face value, although it has a powerful precedent in the Spanish moralist Fray Antonio de Guevara and his *Menosprecio de corte y alabanza de aldea* (translated into English by Henry Vaughan as *The Praise and Happiness of the Countrie-Life*).¹⁰ Surprisingly, John Webster's Vittoria in *The White Devil* ("Oh, happy they that never saw the court", V,vi,262-63) and the Duchess of Malfi (III,v,112-13) utter a similar reflection, although neither of them was obviously interested in Neo-Stoic retirement or peace of mind.¹¹

¹⁰ However, Gilles Monsarrat denies that Guevara or Burton have anything to do with Stoicism; it must be said that his concept of Stoicism is very narrow, and it is self-consciously so, probably as a reaction against the frequent loose uses of the term (Monsarrat, 1984: 40-41).

¹¹ Accepting that John Webster's "sentences" cannot be chosen "to illustrate the positions of the Porch" (Monsarrat, 1984: 149), I am convinced that only a wrong pre-conception of what we are

If Stoic simple life was seldom dramatized, it probably was because it constituted a somewhat undramatic topic (see Heywood's Frankford in *A Woman Killed with Kindness*); however it seemed to function much better in poetry, where it produced several works of clear Stoic flavour and obvious relation with this concept. Thomas Wyatt wrote "If thou wilt mighty be" from a translation from Boethius on the advisability of conquering our passions, and the opposition city/country appears in "My mothers maydes when they did sowe and spynne", whereas both preoccupations are given literary form in "Myne owne John Poyntz, sins ye delight to know" (Sylvester 1983:174-78; 170-74). John Skelton's "The Bowge of Courte" addresses a similar preoccupation with conquering passions (Sylvester 1983:1-23). Ben Jonson, on his part, was undoubtedly influenced by Stoic thought, if only in an unsystematic way; Volpone, and especially Mosca among many other characters in most of his plays (see, for example, *Epicoene*) exemplify how people can destroy their peace of mind by running after false values. However, Jonson's verse epistles are clear examples of his interest in Stoic remedies to achieve peace of mind, particularly in cases of absolute grief (Pérez 1996:337-47); two striking examples of this are "Inviting a Friend to Supper" and "On my First Son" (Abrams 1986:1212; 1210). But Andrew Marvell's "The Garden" is probably the most influential example of a lyrical Renaissance treatment of the Stoic theme of peace of mind, from the opening stanza on the emptiness of fame and the praise of repose to the complaints about the presence of other people as an obstacle to acquire peace of mind (Abrams 1986:1395-397):

(...)
Such was that happy garden state,
While man there walked without a mate:
After a place so pure and sweet,
What other help could yet be meet!

to find in a Stoic dramatist can make us ignore Webster's two most relevant plays in a discussion on Stoicism in English Renaissance literature. Admittedly, there is not a generalized agreement as to what we mean when we associate Webster and Stoicism, and besides it seems difficult to characterize Vittoria's and Flamineo's deaths as Stoic, especially from a narrow conceptualization of what Stoicism is and how are we to find it in these texts. Yet, the analysis of the ways in which both *The White Devil* and *The Duchess of Malfi* explore the tragic consequences of breaking certain rules seems to me to be a reasonable aim for a Neo-Stoic agenda; once we realize that these rules can be best described as natural law, and that the consequences are inevitable from the point of view of many Senecan and Ciceronian notions, Stoicism seems to look like the appropriate intellectual basis of much of the plays' content.

But 'twas beyond a mortal's share
 To wander solitary there;
 Two paradises 'twere in one
 To live in paradise alone (57-64) (Abrams 1986:1396)

Thomas More's "A Rueful Lamentation" and "Pageant Verses" contain similar, although less original, Neo-Stoic attitudes towards peace of mind in connection with a number of recurrent topics such as life, death, fame, love, the divinity, eternity, or poetry (Sylvester 1983:119-29). An interesting and extreme example of the quest for moral tranquillity is George Gascoigne's "Council given to master Bartholmew Withipoll a little before his latter journey to Geane. 1572"; a paranoid example of anti-Catholic propaganda, it shows a radical concern with a set of items he identifies as threats to Neo-Stoic peace of mind, which are identified as the three "Ps" ("poison", "pryde" and "piles and pockes" or "Papistry"), and the three "double Us" ("Wine", "Women" and "Wilfulnesse") (Sylvester 1983:262-68).¹² Love sonnets do not frequently endorse Neo-Stoic injunctions to acquire peace of mind. However, among the diverse qualities of the beloved lady there sometimes is a positive reference to her power to contain the lover's excess: thus, sonnet viii of Spenser's *Amoretti*: "You calme the storme that passion did begin"; or sonnet 87 of Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella*: "Stella whose eyes make all my tempests cleere" (Sylvester 1983:347; 480). Yet the relation of love sonnets with Neo-Stoicism is complex, since whereas we can find typically Stoic features such as renunciation and sacrifice, self-control and sobriety, they are subordinated to the lady, not to the law of nature, and even then, as in sonnet 71 of Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella* "desire still cries, give me some food" (457). A similar case we find in the first ayre of Thomas Campion's *A Book of Ayres*, where an apparently Stoic acceptance of death must be qualified for its dependence on the presence of the poet's beloved Lesbia (527). But a clearer case of Neo-Stoic mistrust of the world's joys and of its resolution to face death and decay with an imperturbable mind can be found in Campion's *An Howres Recreation in Musicke*, where the poet denounces the gross materiality (and hence mortality) of "Fortune, honor, beauty, youth" (549)

¹² Gascoigne's important "The Steele Glas" also deals with peace of mind and some of its opposites: pride, flattery, lust, excessive appetite etc... Gascoigne even makes some critical references to Epicures and self-indulgence.

Peace of mind, as we have already seen, was obtained from cooperating with the laws of nature, whereas at the same time it was perceived (in a dialectical relationship) as a pre-requisite to act in accordance with those laws. These are unwritten moral prescriptions which are supposed to be obvious to all right-thinking people. This implies, as seems evident, an ideological stance of particular importance, for, as Audrey Chew has penetratingly observed:

when right-thinking people are the ones who identify ideal moral law (the way things ought to be) with custom (the way things are), Stoic morality supports the status quo; but when right-thinking persons are rebels who decide that custom has deviated from the true moral law, Stoic morality may be used to oppose the system. (Chew 1988:149)

However, in my opinion Chew (1988) is exceedingly optimistic when she balances the position supporting the *status quo* with the anti-system opposition, since it is much easier to find co-optation models than subversive ones, and even these are linked to individualistic attitudes of essentialist disbelief rather than to actual rejection of the system as a whole.¹³

The Stoic law of nature is clearly present in Thomas Elyot's *The Boke Called the Governour*. Probably because of Elyot's medieval conservatism and his adherence to the hierarchical system, this work has been seen by some scholars as a dubious Renaissance Stoic source (Monsarrat 1984:29; 81),¹⁴ although there is a general agreement about his Neo-Stoic content. From my own reading of this work, in his *Governour* Elyot constructs a simple structure that consists of a re-reading of Ciceronian Stoicism and the exposition of the benefits and characteristics of a hierarchical organization of society. The social Stoicism of Elyot makes it clear that cooperation is the law of nature, and virtue means living in accordance with this. There is no discussion about those at the top, but Elyot admits that the virtues need to be taught even to them. His conservatism can be easily detected in his belief that there is no conflict between the laws of nature, the wisdom of the

¹³ This can be seen very clearly, in my opinion, in Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* and Chapman's *Bussy plays*.

¹⁴ Monsarrat's narrow concept of Stoicism makes it difficult for Elyot's *Governour* to fit into an orthodox Stoic pattern, and this for basically two reasons: (a) it was more a guide to practical ethics; (b) Stoicism was a minor element for Elyot within his solid construction of Christian belief. However, it must be said that the problem is of a deep epistemological nature, since Monsarrat's rejection of Cicero's *De Officiis* as a Stoic work leaves no room for further discussion; see Chew (1988:76-77), Schneider (1995a:126-27).

ancients and the contemporary system (or custom). This idealistic scenario rejects any kind of contestation promoting acquiescence and consent, and distances Elyot from other Christian Neo-Stoic authors such as More (Elyot 1907:47-48; 62; 145; 183-84).

With relation to drama it is good to remember that, as Una Ellis-Fermor stated already in the nineteen thirties, “Stoic repudiation of wealth, power & high place”, whereas supported by characters in theory, was rarely practised “as portrayed dramatically” (1936:24). However, it seems to me that it is easier to find plays which endorse the law of nature than it was to find characters actually behaving in order to achieve peace of mind. The Stoic stress on the important role played by rationality was dramatically exploited by means of the very productive conflict of will and reason, best exemplified in the figures of kings forgetting their duties. Thomas Sackville and Thomas Norton’s *Gorboduc* is the dramatization of the tragedy that results when kings forget the laws of nature. Sackville and Norton’s king commits two mistakes (strikingly similar to those committed by Shakespeare’s *Lear*): he abdicates too soon (his sons are too young), and he gives the younger more than corresponds. This violation of the law of nature underlines one significant characteristic of Neo-Stoicism: there are laws that impose certain duties on the king, or, in other words, the individual is ultimately always subjected to the community, and to ignore this rule, in the case of monarchs, brings about chaos in the form of civil war and parricide (I,ii,218-22; 156-60). The play offers two different sets of laws, each with different qualities; on the one hand, physical law appears as self-evident and unchangeable: men are mortal; on the other, moral law is subject to upheaval. Consequently, tampering with the system (the hierarchical system) is possible, and punishment, then, may be either obvious (evil is punished in the play: poetic justice) or inscrutable (the good are destroyed with the bad). The reason is that the destruction of this ideal moral system is so terrible a crime that once disturbed it—the disarranged system—may injure anyone. Again, the ideological message seems to be an all-too clear defence of the *status quo*.

The Neo-Stoic concern with social roles, their importance, and the necessity of respecting them, is also typical of Shakespeare’s drama. It must be quickly added that the commonest form of Stoicism in Shakespeare’s plays is social Ciceronian (like the one we find in Elyot), which means that Shakespeare will allow for both the existence of Providence and social and individual responsibility. Thus, Edmund in *King Lear*, Iago in *Othello* or Cassius in *Julius Caesar* will be considered individually guilty for their

crimes and consequently punished for their actions. The reason is, of course, that moral evil is a personal choice, and so the individual is demanded the effort of following the right path. *Richard II* or *Henry VI* are examples of what happens when a king does not behave like one, and whereas *1Henry IV* is about the same thing, *2Henry IV* and *Henry V* give the view of the regenerated monarch: the beneficial effects of following Thomas Elyot's advices.

Whether the focus is on the disrupter (*Macbeth*, *Richard III*, *Julius Caesar*, *Coriolanus*), on the victims (*Romeo and Juliet*), or on both (*Othello*), in Shakespeare (like in so many other authors) we can say that the pattern is one of order violated followed by resulting chaos and the subsequent restoring of order. In all these plays the hierarchical system is the natural one, virtue means willingly playing one's assigned part, those in power have a superior moral insight, and Nature, in the long run, does not tolerate questioning the status quo. Rebellion is then not justified *a priori*, even if the king apparently goes against the law of nature, although if a particular revolt is successful it will be ideologically incorporated within the law of nature as part of Nature's master plan. The most relevant feature of Shakespeare's drama in this context is that it plays out in full the conflict between self-sufficiency and self-sacrifice, which lies at the core of Neo-Stoicism. To be precise, this is, as I already stated, what separates primitive from historical Stoicism: the individual as centre of the action, or the individual as part of a superior entity, be it named community, society or country. As I will try to explain, much of the period's theatre dramatizes both the evolution from one model to the other and the (often tragic) consequences of this transition (in this sense, see for example the destruction of the once so 'useful' heroes Coriolanus or Othello).

George Chapman is undoubtedly one of the most Stoic of all Jacobean playwrights. It can be said that historical Stoicism, which subordinated personal self-interest to social duty, is the dominant brand of Stoicism in his plays, and this can be well appreciated in *The Revenge of Bussy D'Ambois*. On the other hand, Stoic self-sufficiency, more typical of primitive Stoicism (although in a clearly modified fashion) appears in his most popular *Bussy D'Ambois* (Monsarrat 1984:190-95). Bussy is much more easily characterized as a Marlovian hero villain, one of those who do not subordinate individualism to social conformity. In fact, although much has been said in relation to Bussy's virtue and Stoic attitude, his 'justification' speech states clearly the limits of this pseudo-Stoicism:

then be you my king,
 And do a right, exceeding law and nature:
 Who to himself is law, no law doth need,
 Offends no law, and is a king indeed. (II,i,201-04)

On the other hand, there are evident references to Stoicism when Bussy dies, especially by the ghost of the Friar and by means of a comparison with Hercules (V,iv,147-53); to claim, as Monsarrat does, that not all of Hercules' deeds were truly Stoic, and that some were difficult to allegorize (1984:193), seems to impose on text, author and audience a philosophical exactness difficult to reconcile with the purposes of such a play. Furthermore, I tend to think that Chapman departed from more conservative writers in providing this hero with some kind of justification for relying entirely on his own interpretation of the law of nature, and this agrees with the two possibilities that we considered in relation to Stoicism and this law. I am inclined to interpret this lack of philosophical consistency as a dramatic incidence, which functions —like Chapman's dramatic concept of fate, which seems to be a personalized providence or *wyrd*— as a plot device in order to increase the interest of his plays. In any case, it has to be admitted that Bussy is a controversial figure when analyzed from a Stoic perspective; then, we may question whether he is a servant of destiny (a good Stoic); an ambitious climber (a sham Stoic) or whether we are expected to condemn or admire him.

Much easier to analyze is *The Revenge* with Stoic preoccupations in mind. Clermont D'Ambois shares Bussy's most significant Stoic features (self-sufficiency, valour, dignity), and also some of the characteristics that Bussy lacked: virtue, some respect for the orthodox natural law and learning (II,i,84-88). But Clermont's self-sufficiency is certainly Stoic, and thus he firmly believes that the part must submit to the whole, that is, to the perfection of the Universe (IV,i,137-57). He is also able to differentiate, unlike Bussy, between outward and inward qualities: what is external to us and what is ours, or greatness and goodness. Clermont is explicitly presented as a disciple of Epictetus (I,i,335), and borrowings from this author's Stoicism have been detected by different authors (Monsarrat 1984:211-19). Besides, Clermont's position in relation to private revenge is much more Stoic than Bussy's was since the former rejects this line of action. In this sense, Chapman's achievement lies precisely in his ability to, on the one hand, oblige Clermont to revenge (because he promised to do so to the apparition), and on the other to show how, by rejecting that action which he has to (and actually

does) perform, Clermont leaves no doubt as to his Stoic integrity. As Monsarrat has rightfully perceived, the debate is “not on vengeance itself but on the *manner* in which a virtuous man must accomplish it” (1984:214). In short, Clermont is a credible Stoic adapted for dramatic purposes and, mostly important, harmless; he is the tamed and conservative version of the dangerously self-sufficient and aggressively heterodox pseudo-Stoic Bussy.

John Marston is also one of the playwrights of this period most clearly influenced by Stoicism: he explicitly followed Epictetus and actually included Stoic characters within his plays, although these characters were either true Stoics, satirists, or would-be Stoics.¹⁵ In general terms, Marston’s plays show a strong dislike for personal ambition, and support selfless-duty, or, in other words, the Ciceronian ground plan that we saw in Elyot’s intellectual construction. Then we can see a combination of Machiavellian opportunists set against Ciceronian idealists; the former stand for reason of state or the principle that kings are above the law (as we saw with Chapman’s Bussy), whereas the latter present obedience to the unwritten moral law. *Antonio and Mellida* is especially relevant to this discussion because of the figure of Andrugio, a moderately just king who oscillates between Stoic descriptions of the wise man and strict respect for the law of nature, and an un-Stoic inability to be patient and avoid thoughts of revenge. Indeed, if Andrugio’s speech on royalty is actually Stoic and Senecan (IV,i,46-66), the first three acts are full of grief, impatience, light speech and despair. The conclusion must be then that the most interesting lesson by Andrugio is then not on Stoicism but on the all too frequent mismatch between philosophical discourse and human conduct.

Antonio’s Revenge is, to my mind, a much more interesting play from the point of view of Stoicism. If it is true that Pandulpho is not in the end a perfect Stoic, he is probably all the more relevant for that; Pandulpho functions, for the first half of the play, as a mouthpiece for Stoic doctrine, preaching Ciceronian social duty to the tyrant Piero. Not even his son’s terrible death will move him initially (he even laughs at it to the indignation of Alberto) (I,ii,297-99; 335-37), and he claims to be unaffected by fears or wrongs of any kind (II,i,81-82), seriously considers suicide as a coherent

¹⁵ Incidentally, it must be pointed out that Marston’s admiration for Stoic ideas was not homogeneous. Thus, he disliked precisely Stoic self-sufficiency (Senecan or not), although this is only relatively relevant since it is not the kind of Stoicism I mention him here for; in fact, Marston’s attacks to certain Stoic ideas come from Calvin and Plutarch, although apparently not directly but through commentary by La Primaudaye in his *French Academie* (Monsarrat, 1984: 161-65).

decision (II,i,149-52), and declares that fortune does not affect him (II,i,170-72). But this moral perfection seems so inhuman that it is difficult to know if we are to take the play as a tragicomedy or a tragedy, a parody or a satire; when Pandulpho's morals eventually collapse (IV,ii,67-76), the audience (or readers) already expected it. What we have then is a criticism of Stoic pretensions of imperturbability, which are presented as inhuman and not desirable when taken (as in Pandulpho's case) to the extreme. When Pandulpho realizes that he cannot be a Stoic, he then becomes what Antonio is: an anti-Stoic, a revenger. But the play does clearly reject this second option with even more strength than it did the first one: if Stoicism is condemned, it is because of its too high demands. Stoicism in its purest form is not compatible with human existence, and so it has to be adapted to human possibilities: "man cannot be a true Stoic but he should manage to be Stoical" (Monsarrat 1984:176).

The Stoic sage, also known as *the wise man*, was defined above as the 'ideal man'. A strict definition of this figure leaves us with "God's equal" (Monsarrat 1984:13), a happy creature indifferent to all external things (including wealth, love, fame or health) and absolutely self-sufficient. Obviously, this wise man is an abstraction, and the fact that it is almost impossible to find him in Renaissance literary representations should not be noticeable. In general terms, the wise man is the man who knows his place within the community and, following Elyot, succeeds in controlling his passions. In poetry, Surrey's "Epitaph on Sir Thomas Wyatt" constitutes a valuable approach to this figure:

(...)

An eye whose judgement no affect could blind,
 Friends to allure and foes to reconcile,
 Whose piercing look did represent a mind
 With virtue fraught, reposèd, void of guile.

A heart where dread yet never so impressed
 To hide the thought that might the truth advance;
 In neither fortune lift nor yet repressed
 To swell in wealth or yield unto mischance.

A valiant corpse where force and beauty met,
 Happy -alas, too happy, but for foes,
 Lived and ran the race that Nature set,
 O manhood's shape, where she the mold did lose. (21-32) (Abrams 1986:478)

As we can perceive in this detailed account of the wise man, Surrey does two things; firstly, he enumerates the basic features of a Neo-Stoic wise man: alien to excessive anger and passion, to fear, exhilaration and depression, and who obeys the law of nature ("lived and ran the race that Nature set"). Secondly, he asserts that such a man is a prodigy, an exceptional figure and, as such, not a model who can be followed strictly. Probably this is the reason why, in the first place, we find this description in an epitaph, and, secondly, most —if not all— representations of the Neo-Stoic wise man only portray failed examples of the Stoic sage, never a completely successful one.

We can find in Shakespearean drama several isolated elements arguably relating to the wise man but, as I have just suggested, which never fully qualify someone as a truly authentic Stoic sage in all respects: Henry V's Ciceronian qualities as a ruler; *Julius Caesar's* Brutus, who devotes his life to common welfare; Horatio's restrained behaviour in *Hamlet*; Hotspur's Stoical nature in *1 and 2 Henry IV* etc... In this sense, Ben Schneider has pointed out how Cordelia is a clear example of the wise man or "plain dealer": she rejects flattery, connects words and deeds, and treasures a certain concept of love based on trust, fidelity and sincerity (1995b:1-4). Schneider equally argues that Kent is a touchstone of the virtues of the wise man: constant (he keeps the same today and tomorrow) and integral (he remains the same on the inside and on the outside) (1995b:8-10).¹⁶ Marston equally offers a choice of different types and qualities of the Stoic hero, who appears, under different guises and partially portrayed, in some of his plays, as I suggested above: Feliche the contented man and Andrugio the good Ciceronian public servant —confused and confusing Stoic— in *Antonio and Mellida*; or the proud pseudo-Stoic Pandulpho in *Antonio's Revenge*.

It should be clear by now that Neo-Stoicism occupies a central position in sixteenth and seventeenth century writing, and consequently to remain ignorant of this fact blinds us to many of the intellectual and aesthetic properties of the works of this period. I am persuaded that a detailed analysis of the functions that Neo-Stoicism fulfils in these texts, functions which I have only glimpsed at here, will indicate that this philosophical school stands

¹⁶ The categorization established by Schneider seems especially useful: thus, the Stoic hero must have: constancy (including integrity, responsibility, and loyalty); generosity (including graciousness, empathy, sense of justice and reciprocity); plainness (honesty, frankness, modesty and unpretentiousness); and courage (patience, endurance, fortitude, despising suffering and death) (1995a:130-34; 1995b:1-10).

as one of the systems that tries to keep together traditional society by means of constant ideological reinforcing of the old ideals (Thomas Wyatt in Surrey's epitaph), although this frequently backfires; in other words, only through a Stoic lense may we perceive the dialectical relations and confrontation of social harmony versus individualistic discord (of an un-Stoic kind). The explanation may well be that Neo-Stoicism offers something that we could call, for want of a better term, *social alienation*; by this I mean a representation of the individual integrated within society through assimilation and full acceptance of social norms but who is, at the same time, trying to defend himself from hostile circumstances by disengaging from these norms and attempting at his own definition, either successfully—by Stoic standards— or not: Chapman's Bussy; Shakespeare's Othello, Hamlet, Coriolanus, Cordelia or Kent; Marston's Antonio). Some of the texts would show how this is eventually done by means of a return to primitive asocial Stoicism; in other words, through a paradoxical re-engagement with society enacted by revenge, precisely the kind of subversively individualistic action Neo-Stoicism is trying to avoid. The fierce repression of these acts testifies to the importance of Neo-Stoicism as a useful code of behaviour: based on simple reciprocity, it was useful since it involved the suppression of private wishes, and consequently sixteenth and seventeenth century texts abound with the destruction of un-Stoic disrupters, in order to create an environment somehow similar to Marvell's garden.¹⁷

This evidently has to do with the social and psychological conflicts that the texts of these centuries reproduce, and which have been analyzed from a diversity of interesting but partial (and hence incomplete) approaches (be they formalist, new-historicist, feminist, etc.). What the presence of Neo-Stoicism eventually tells us about the texts and about their contexts is that there seems to be an epistemological transition, of which Neo-Stoicism

¹⁷ Ben Schneider has provided us with the most far-reaching interpretation of the role of Stoicism in English literature of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. According to Schneider, Stoicism functioned as a representative of the old episteme, and as one line of thought that stresses a common narrative of the correct behaviour; thus, it is possible to account for the revival of Stoicism during these centuries by appealing to the transition from feudal to bourgeoisie relations, or, in other words, to the passing from the symbolic interaction model based on the ancient economic ethics of neighbourliness (right action is that which coincides with mutually understood social norms) to the exchange value model (right action is whatever makes sense given the goal), in Karl Marx's formulation (1993:111-13; 1995a:127-30). Schneider's theory also relies on Weber and Habermas, who have investigated a transition which they identify as one of substitution: of the old reciprocity nexus for the emergent cash nexus or egotistical calculation. See also Schneider's webpage <<http://www.stoics.com>>.

(as Humanism, Protestantism or capitalism) is a part, and which is visible through the faultlines of these works. An analysis that goes beyond this introductory study of Neo-Stoicism in sixteenth and seventeenth century literature would probably contribute to an understanding of this change, a transition which transcends the literary to account for the creation of a new structure of feeling.

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