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# Rome and Tragic Ambivalence: The Case of Jonson's *Sejanus*

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## Chapter 6

In a sense, a 'Roman' tragedy in the English Renaissance merely meant one employing a plot from classical Roman history, and harnessing its capacity to amplify standard tragic modes. Well-known stories of the Romans, impressed on learned people from the core of their humanistic education, were conducive to depicting almost any sort of catastrophe. The *de casibus* tragedy inherited from medieval tradition, with proud worldlings undone by fickle Fortune, and its two major derivations, tyrant tragedy and court-intrigue tragedy, obviously made for skeletons to which Roman storylines could effectively give flesh and sinew. No specimen of tyranny could be purer than Fletcher's *Valentinian*, nor of court intrigue than May's *Agrippina*. But less obviously, too, a Roman setting could enliven various tragic subgenres: epic/episodic tragedy (the anonymous *Caesar's Revenge*), revenge tragedy (Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*), sex tragedy (Richards's *Messalina*), love-and-honor tragedy (Marston's *Sophonisba*), and what we might call philosophical tragedy (Chapman's *Caesar and Pompey*) all benefitted from Roman atmospheres.

But was there anything distinctive about Roman tragedy? Interestingly enough, Jonson accidentally provided the best articulation for what set Roman tragic subjects apart, even in his explanation for why his *Sejanus* met the basic qualifications of tragedy in general: the reader critical of the action's protracted time-scheme must still credit Jonson with having 'discharged the other offices of a tragic writer', including 'truth of argument, dignity of persons, gravity and height of elocution', and 'fullness and frequency of sentence' (*To the Readers*).<sup>1</sup> The principles of tragedy stipulated here—an analysis of history, a massive and majestic sense of scale, and a sober moral instructiveness—might seem strange to us, inclined as we are toward viewing tragedy as centered on the passions of a central hero. But by the tastes of the time, Jonson's priorities were fairly familiar, as corroborated by Sir Philip Sidney's criticisms of native tragedy in the *Defence*.<sup>2</sup> Strange or not, however, these three Jonsonian standards for tragedy apply peculiarly to Roman matter, especially if taken together. First, a dramatist might draw a historically grounded plot from any number of traditions, but from the Romans there was a vast and diversified wealth of true stories of remarkable personages, validated by the most authoritative and fascinating body of historiography in the world. In Renaissance intellectual life, revitalized engagement with writers like Julius Caesar, Sallust, and Livy went along with the propagation of writers like Polybius, Plutarch, and Tacitus, Jonson's main source; using such serious, famous, detailed, and copious history, free from the celebratory and derogatory imperatives, and the relatively low esteem, of English chronicle, a dramatist was particularly well equipped to elevate a play to an exercise in historical reconstruction. Second, homegrown super-heroes like Henry V and super-villains like Richard III notwithstanding, with Rome the dramatist had a ready access to titanic scope. The truths of Roman history were great and mighty truths, the disasters recorded in them not merely sad for those involved but awe-inspiring and world-altering. Though they had lived in the real world, the Romans stood as giants who had made it what it was, and they repeatedly illustrated human extremes. Whether exhibiting demi-godlike virtue or devil-worthy depravity, they could endow a dramatis personae with a built-in stateliness and sublimity—and with, also, an undeniable relevance. For, finally, given Roman stories' truth and importance, they were ubiquitously held to supply moral lessons, utility for personal and political life. For Jonson, any brand of tragedy ought to be sententious, by which he literally means it should be fortified with cleverly formulated aphorisms, and also, I think, he implies its personae should clearly exemplify a sound moral message. But since their lives were so commonly read as universally applicable models, positive or negative, the Romans were unmatched in their usefulness for exemplarity. This special tripartite power in Roman tragedy Jonson would seem to have affirmed, in caring to ensure the survival of only two of his tragedies, *Sejanus* and *Catiline*. A Roman subject was unusually suited to make a tragedy all of what he thought tragedy ought to be.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> References are from Ben Jonson, *Sejanus*, ed. Jonas A. Barish (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965). On the text and on Jonson's historical sources (Tacitus and Dio Cassius) I have consulted *Sejanus His Fall*, ed. Tom Cain, *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Ben Jonson* Vol. 2, ed. David Bevington et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

<sup>2</sup> Sir Philip Sidney, *A Defence of Poetry*, ed. J. A. Van Dorsten (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966), pp. 65-67.

<sup>3</sup> On this passage and Jonson's concept of historically-based tragedy, see for example J. A. Bryant, 'The Significance of Ben Jonson's First Requirement for Tragedy: "Truth of Argument"', *Studies in Philology*, 49 (1952), 195-293; John Henderson, 'Jonson's Too Roman Plays: From *Julius Caesar* to *Sejanus* and *Catiline*', in Sarah Annes Brown and Catherine Silverstone (eds.), *Tragedy in Transition* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), pp. 103-22; John E. Curran, Jr., *Character and the Individual*

However, if Roman tragedy had unique potential to realize truth of argument, gravity and dignity, and sententiousness, it also had a unique ambivalence, one created by the tension between these qualities, especially the first with the latter two. As luminaries such as Nietzsche and Northrop Frye have long since helped us to understand, tragedy itself is inherently ambivalent. What I suggest here is that in Roman tragedy, ambivalence takes a form of its own. While some Roman plays, like Fletcher's *Bonduca* and two of his collaborations with Massinger, *The False One* and *The Prophetess*, show some generic indefiniteness, most Elizabethan and Jacobean dramas on Roman history are, unlike English chronicle plays, properly classifiable as tragedies, merely in that they emphasize calamity and death. And yet the historical component in Roman tragedies is fully as pronounced as it is in English history plays, or indeed any sector of the drama. A Roman story offered the dramatist an excellent opportunity to probe into history, but the more this was taken advantage of, the greater was the risk that the history would render human extremes rather more contemptible than grand, and would clutter the moralizing beyond all utility—would shake up the hierarchy of values, certainly on the crucial political issue of monarchy, but on many other issues as well.<sup>4</sup> Hence it's unsurprising that, in terms of both sublimity and exigency, commentators have often found *Julius Caesar* and *Antony and Cleopatra* markedly Janus-faced, even for Shakespeare.<sup>5</sup> Renaissance English Roman tragedy is different, then, in its kind of ambivalence—in how it foregrounds truth, grandeur, and example, but in how, concomitantly, its concern for history troubles questions of human dignity, along with those of politics and morality. Such troubling can be seen with an overview of three of the main habits of thought playwrights consistently portray in their Romans in order to cultivate a sense of historical context; Romans are imagined as: alive to their own history and their identity as Romans; attuned to their own political traditions and processes; and at least ostensibly dedicated to the directives of Stoicism. All three facets of this imagined Roman mentality add to and detract from grandeur, and clarify as well as obfuscate moral and political meaning. While exploring these dynamics will require me to reference other plays—Lodge's *Wounds of Civil War*, Massinger's *Roman Actor*, and the anonymous *Statelie Tragedie of Claudius Tiberius Nero* will recur—I will concentrate on *Sejanus* as representative.

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*Personality in English Renaissance Drama: Tragedy, History, Tragicomedy* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2014), pp. 251-56.

<sup>4</sup> For the ambivalent effects of ideas of Rome on the drama, see for example T. J. B. Spencer, 'Shakespeare and the Elizabethan Romans', *Shakespeare Survey*, 10 (1957), 27-38; Robert S. Miola, *Shakespeare's Rome* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983); Lisa Hopkins, *The Cultural Uses of the Caesars on the English Renaissance Stage* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008); Warren Chernaik, *The Myth of Rome in Shakespeare and His Contemporaries* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011). For the republican or subversive strain, see Andrew Hadfield, *Shakespeare and Republicanism* (Cambridge University Press, 2005). For republican valences in Jonson's Roman tragedies, see Julie Sanders, *Ben Jonson's Theatrical Republics* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998), pp. 11-33.

<sup>5</sup> The seminal accounts are Ernest Schanzer, 'The Problem of Julius Caesar', *Shakespeare Quarterly* 6 (1955), 297-308; Janet Adelman, *The Common Liar: An Essay on Antony and Cleopatra* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973).

In Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*, memory of Roman history weighs on the characters<sup>6</sup>; as Cleopatra mentions, there is something we can call 'Roman thought' (I.ii.83), and it seems to consist of the duty, honor, public-spiritedness, and fearlessness that Romans should feel bound to, especially in light of this history. And yet, even while Antony cannot suppress 'Roman thought', it is also cast painfully as a contrast to his current thought process. In this play, as repeatedly in Roman tragedy, the characters' self-conscious and historically informed Romanitas has a dubious, double-sided relation to their present—and to our sympathy. In *The Wounds of Civil War*,<sup>7</sup> probably the oldest extant Roman tragedy, the strife in the late Republic between Marius and Sulla is no mere power-struggle; Rome is torn asunder because the Roman spirit has been lost, *and* because of compulsions the Roman rivals feel, *qua* Romans. Marius' son sees Sulla's ascendancy as a total violation of the old Roman ethos, 'For governance is banish'd out of Rome', and dies praying it will be restored by some 'second Brutus with a Roman mind' (V.iii.70, 76). The Roman way, the *mos maiorum*, is a guiding force, and yet is relegated to memory and hope—and yet, too, it is such also for Sulla himself. For him, demanding predominance is 'befitting well a Roman mind' (II.i.18), and in the Senate his advocate Octavius understands his strong-arming as a restoration of ancient, regal-period laws (III.i.52-56). To the Romans, true Romanness is both inaccessible to and inescapably operant in the now, and while from their point of view it is wholly admirable, it cannot be so from ours. The Romans suffering under Domitian's tyranny in *The Roman Actor* condemn its departure from his predecessors Vespasian and Titus (I.i.81-91), and wonder 'What Roman could indure this?' (I.iv.52).<sup>8</sup> And yet Domitian seems in line with precedent, he being comparable to Tiberius, Caligula, and Nero (III.i.16-17, 107), and much of the validation of the actors to whom he is singularly responsive stems from their ability to make Rome's past come to life: portrayals of a Camillus or Scipio will inspire 'All that haue any sparke of *Roman* in them' (I.iii.86-95). So is Domitian Roman or anti-Roman for being as he is? A similar conundrum infuses *Claudius Tiberius Nero*, hereafter called *Tiberius* for clarity's sake.<sup>9</sup> Hailed by his fellow Romans for his noble 'Romaine heart' (336), Germanicus sums up the best examples of past Roman heroism (338-51, 1055-62), but he is also utterly anomalous: he alone lives up to the standard of the late Augustus (308-10); he himself sees apocalyptic corrosion overtaking all aspects of Roman society (510-30); and his justifications of Roman imperialism fail, since, as his foreign adversary Vonones remarks, no other 'Romane spirits' share Germanicus' courtesy (1854-60). In this play avatars of the ancient Roman ethos, like the Bruti, can be drawn on to exemplify how 'Romanes haue valiant and vndaunted minds' (2616-22)—but this merely in aid of a ploy, by the slimy villain Sejanus.

Focusing on just this phase of Tiberius' tyranny, Jonson's *Sejanus* treats this problem with more sophistication, but it is the same problem; the Romanitas the characters recall and refer to is both

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<sup>6</sup> References to Shakespeare are from *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans, et al. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974).

<sup>7</sup> References are from Thomas Lodge, *The Wounds of Civil War*, ed. Joseph W. Houppert (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1969).

<sup>8</sup> References to *The Roman Actor* are from *The Plays and Poems of Philip Massinger* Vol. 3, ed. Philip Edwards and Colin Gibson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976).

<sup>9</sup> References are from *The Tragedy of Tiberius 1607*, ed. W. W. Greg et al. (Oxford: Malone Society, 1914).

dead and alive, and of questionable goodness either way. As with the Sejanus of *Tiberius*, in *Sejanus* the idea of a Roman mind exemplified in Roman history is pervasive and compelling, but it can be voiced as hollow cant, serving the connivance of a spy. Maneuvering Sabinus into self-incrimination, Latiaris pretends to insist that ‘the genius of the Roman race / Should not be so extinct, but that bright flame / Of liberty might be revived again’ (IV.142-44). Though Latiaris’ falsity would seem to affirm that genius’ extinction, how therefore could the idea of a Roman genius strike a chord? With the play’s action set after Germanicus’ death, this sense is all the more acute, for now he belongs entirely to history, to a bygone time. ‘If there were seeds of the old virtue left, / They lived in him’ (I.119-20), complains Arruntius; Sabinus agrees and catalogues the ways Germanicus exuded ‘touches of late Romans’, mixing ‘Pompey’s dignity, / The innocence of Cato, Caesar’s spirit, / Wise Brutus’ temperance’ (149-54). Germanicus proved that the ideal Roman character could be realized, but he was also in a class by himself, superior even to Alexander (144-47). He was ‘too great for us’ (158), a vivid clarification of what Romanness is, and received as such by the many Romans who recall him, but then again, he was also a unique model of human, not merely Roman, excellence, a one-time-only phenomenon looming accusatorily to set off what Rome isn’t. In a way he lives on in the old general Silius, who defiantly holds up his own service record against the senatorial kangaroo court, and refuses to remain silent by declaring, ‘I’am a Roman’ (III.168). His personal history has been one of fighting beneath ‘our Roman eagles’ (257), as a proper Roman should, and by many, though quietly, he’s thought an ‘Excellent Roman’ (286), for having lived this Roman-like life and then justifying it now with an equally Roman-like spirit. But is he showing that what is Germanican and Roman-like can’t be quelled, is he its last, dying gasp, or is he evidence that the Germanican and the Roman are *not* the same, but in opposition? Between Silius and the corrupt Senate, which is the Roman rule and which the exception?

Though this kind of question is typically posed by Roman tragedy, the historically conscious Jonson is particularly good at bringing it out, with his particularly historically conscious characters.<sup>10</sup> *Catiline* takes place at a singularly pivotal, liminal time in Rome’s history, in between the convulsions of Sulla and Caesar, with the Republic still afloat but just about to sink; thus the characters are everywhere keenly concerned with what of the Romans necessarily stays and endures.<sup>11</sup> Jonson’s Cicero—just as the real Cicero did—beseeches the Senate to ask, ‘in what clime are we? / What region doe we liue in? in what ayre? / What common-wealth, or state is this we haue?’ (IV.271-73), forcing the issue of Roman identity, and whether the shamefulness of recent events has actually violated or fulfilled it. For, the conspirators themselves and their supporters have their own historically-minded views of what Romanness is and how it’s been continued or truncated; for Catiline, ‘all / Were well in Rome’ (I.359-60), and Rome’s natural state revived, with a return of a Sulla-style reign of terror (I.229-32), and his well-wisher Sempronia delivers a lecture arguing the permanence of Roman class stratification, despite its retaining none of its primeval virtue (II.115-42). In *Sejanus*, historical reflection is undertaken almost exclusively by the good, and, the empire having been long settled, it has not the

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<sup>10</sup> For a different view, that the Romans of *Sejanus* have ‘anachronistic minds’ illustrative more of Renaissance Machiavellianism than a historically imagined Rome, see Philip Goldfarb, ‘Jonson’s Renaissance Romans: Classical Adaptation in *Sejanus*’, *Interdisciplinary Humanities* 31 (2014), 53-62.

<sup>11</sup> References are from Ben Jonson, *Catiline His Conspiracy*, ed. Lynn Harold Harris (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1916).

same urgency—but it does intervene a lot, and it yields a similar dissonance. Reacting to Sabinus' rebuke of the times, Arruntius answers that 'The men, / The men are not the same! 'Tis we are base, / Poor, and degenerate from th'exalted strain / Of our great fathers. . . . There's nothing Roman in us, nothing good, / Gallant, or great ' (I.86-103). Arruntius is appalled, much like Cicero, because of a conviction that the present Romans fail *as* Romans, and so we see the paradox: the deep-seatedness of this conviction in itself disproves the accusation, for only true Romans have it in them to be appalled at a lapse from Romanitas; but all at once, if the *men* have changed, there might never have been any such thing. We are thus led to ponder on how societies change through time, as well as on whether a given nation has an essential character; moreover, we must wonder, too, specifically about the Roman character, for what Arruntius mourns is the 'soul / Of godlike Cato', that 'durst be good / When Caesar durst be evil', and other 'mighty spirits' like that of 'constant Brutus'. History, it may well seem, exemplifies Romanness only intermittently through lonely rectitude against a status quo of Roman 'evil'.

Soon the historian Cordus is referenced, Arruntius quoting him on how Cassius was the last of the Romans (103-04); Jonson proceeds to use Cordus as a showcase for the play's analysis of Roman historical self-consciousness. It is Cordus who has envisioned the parallel between Germanicus and Alexander (I.136-42), and Cordus who joins Silius in setting off, through wrongful prosecution, the tyranny of the Sejanus phase of the Tiberian regime. Cordus, whispered about for researching events from the civil war between Caesar and Pompey onward, times 'somewhat queasy to be touched' (I.82), is marked for death by Sejanus, whose report to Tiberius couches commemoration of the past as necessarily scandalous to the present:

Then is there one Cremutius  
Cordus, a writing fellow they have got  
To gather notes of the precedent times,  
And make them into annals—a most tart  
And bitter spirit, I hear, who under color  
Of praising those, doth tax the present state,  
Censures the men, the actions, leaves no trick,  
No practice unexamined, parallels  
The times, the governments, a professed champion  
For the old liberty (II.303-12)

Sejanus rightly anticipates Tiberius' insecurity about being unfavorably compared to a former, better Rome, but the insecurity does more than merely clinch that unfavorable comparison; it also establishes the reality of that former, better Rome. Tiberius' Rome seems a cancer metastasizing out of a much different, healthy body. That Sejanus tries to redefine unvarnished historical truth—annals—as 'color', what we'd call 'spin', suggests how acceptance of Tiberius' changed, debased version of Rome can only come from falsification of Roman tradition—only, that is, from Sejanus' propaganda or from

intimidation. On trial (III.370-487), Cordus drives home this suggestion by asserting that an accurate account of the previous generations entails their tolerance of accurate accounts. Noting that Augustus permitted Livy to write sympathetically of anti-Caesarians, Cordus makes openness to historical truth a historically true feature of the Roman *mos*, and his partisans affirm this by observing the folly of Sejanus' flunkies' efforts to gag history and burn Cordus' books, and thereby 'color' the ugliness of a monstrous, anti-Roman Rome: 'how ridiculous / Appears the Senate's brainless diligence, / Who think they can, with present power, extinguish / The memory of all succeeding times!' (471-74), says Arruntius. Time reveals truth, and no true Roman fears this; indeed, since, as Cordus claims, 'Posterity pays every man his honor' (456), a Roman acting as a proper Roman will inevitably be known as such by other proper Romans. But Cordus' historical perspective, which posits historical perspective as a Roman tradition consonant with a traditional Roman goodness, also points in the other direction: perhaps the only real tradition is conflict pitting Roman authority against the best Romans, the most principled and civic-minded. From this direction Sejanus is quite correct about Cordus, for Cordus' intent to 'tax' Tiberius is all too plain, as is the damage done not only to Tiberius, but also to Augustus and to Julius Caesar, by the lionizing of figures like Scipio, Brutus, and Cassius. Perhaps the true Roman spirit flashes out only sometimes in history, and only to be beaten down, with memory of it entirely accidental: Tacitus' words, luckily, survived to tell Jonson something about Cordus, but those of Cordus himself did not.

Noting this pessimistic strain, with Romanitas subsisting either in brief, defeated strikes against authority, or, signifying vice rather than virtue, in the authority itself, turns us to portrayals of Roman systems of government. In Roman tragedy, Romans are made to participate vigorously in their distinctive polity, mindful of its time-honored *modus operandi*. Even Shakespeare's Coriolanus has this mindfulness in him, for though he dislikes the ritual of the napless vesture of humility (see II.i.231-36), its sanctity is a fact of life in his world, and he is deeply affected by this fact. And yet, in its gravitation to political crisis points, Roman tragedy almost always lays siege to such sanctity, showing disturbances or even revolutions in it—whether it be republican or imperial. We are prompted to shock at nigh-blasphemous political transgression, of the kind that cannot go uncorrected, and simultaneously to suspicion that whatever seems to stand as the legitimate polity is ripe to be transgressed. The ferocious battle for supremacy between Marius and Sulla in *The Wounds of Civil War* burns with each man's private power-greed, pride, and animosity, and yet the fire seems contained in the strictures of republican formality, with the play punctuated thoroughly with senatorial protocols and oratory. To protest Sulla's temerity, Lepidus need only point out that 'The name of tribune hath continued long' (II.i.199); to support Sulla's program, the smooth-talking Anthony calls on 'the Senate's name', and cries, 'O citizens, are laws of country left? / Is justice banish'd from this Capitol?' (III.i.18-22). In IV.i this juxtaposition of rampant rules-breaking with scrupulous rules-following verges on absurdity, as, with Marius' gang tossing out a consul pell-mell—'Is then the reverence of this robe contemned?', rages the victim (135)—Marius voices his decorous obedience to the other consul: 'Cinna, you know I am a private man / That still submit my censures to your will' (128-29). Domitian's Rome in *The Roman Actor* has an almost completely degraded polity, with the emperor's will flouting legality (I.ii.84-85), and with oratory, though duly addressed to the 'Fathers conscript', devoted to preposterous flattery of him (I.iii.1-22). And yet, as with the national character, with the national polity the play, especially via the voice of Paris the actor, makes us wonder how much Rome has actually departed from itself. Paris'



persecutor is the Senate, not the Caesar, who, Paris is confident, would judge him much more wisely (I.iii.50-55). To a large extent, Domitian's iniquity is so virulent that it infects even the Senate; but then, to that extent, it seems the Senate is malleable, and fails to function as any enduring force for righteous government. In *Tiberius*, imperial tyrannical novelty displaces the old ways—'no state of *Senate* is requested, / But olde establisht orders quite detested' (1600-01)—and yet also seems coordinated with them; the army's accustomed forms for conferring honors—what 'The Romaine millitarie lawes enforce' (2000)—are what Piso uses to assassinate Germanicus. The play's opening has Tiberius pretending not to want to succeed Augustus, and though he is dissembling (126), and though some of the plebeians come away reading something ominous in his looks (sc ii), he seems comfortable with the conventions of Roman public life, not an interloper alien to it but an integral part of it. He betrays not a hint of strain in hitting all the prescribed notes of the idiom of Roman statesmanship, for he comes to it fully from within:

Now Fathers, we will to the Sacrifice,  
Saluting all the Gods in visitation:  
Let *Lectisternia* three daies be proclaimed,  
The *Sibbels*, counsels, and *Flaminies*,  
*Ianus* shut vp, and *Vestaes* fier blaze,  
Into the middle region of the ayre,  
Wee all my Lords will to the Cappitoll,  
In siluer seale, our records to enrole (280-87)

Jonson's Tiberius has even more of this double-sidedness to him. Appearing later in his reign, when we meet him the Tiberius of *Sejanus* has already eviscerated the mechanisms of the Roman state nearly beyond recognition, so that what's left of Roman political forms is mere theatrics devoid of substance; and yet, since there is no alternative to this theatrics, no going outside of it, and since it is presided over by so consummate an actor, who never lets fall his mask of abiding by Roman political decorum, a kind of substance is strangely reified. It seems *both* that what constitutes the Roman state has been irretrievably gone for a long time, and that what constitutes it can be nothing other than the Rome we see. With his measures to placate the censorious eyes of his own government, Jonson intensifies this problem. As his Tiberius first enters, his guise of humility also one of identification with Roman political tradition—'Our empire, ensigns, axes, rods, and state / Take not away our human nature from us' (I.376-77)—Silius is made to observe that the guise is bad neither in content nor in form, but for being a guise:

If this man  
Had but a mind allied unto his words,  
How blest a fate were it to us, and Rome!  
We could not think that state for which to change,

Although the aim were our old liberty.  
The ghosts of those that fell for that would grieve  
Their bodies lived not, now, again to serve.  
Men are deceived who think there can be thrall  
Beneath a virtuous prince. Wished liberty  
Ne'er lovelier looks than under such a crown. (I.400-09)

The most Roman Romans of the Republic would feel right at home in the Tiberian empire—if only we could believe Tiberius meant what he says, and viewed the fasces with sincere rather than pro forma reverence. Of course Jonson had every incentive to disclaim any implied critique of monarchy per se, but if this disclaimer protects him in his own, Jacobean time, it confuses us about what we should make of his picture of Tiberian time.<sup>12</sup> A free, fundamentally Roman past is totally disconnected from the tyrannized, fundamentally anti-Roman present—and yet the difference is by no means fundamental. Spies and toadies afflict Tiberius' Rome, but only because of his secret, unseen and idiosyncratic receptiveness to them. Everything looks as it should, and might be made to operate as it should were the emperor someone else. The general political question is certainly part of this confusion: if good or ill government does hinge this much on the monarch's idiosyncrasy, monarchy would seem much dispraised; too, though, republicanism is here argued no better at defending liberty, an argument buttressed by the fact of its utter eclipse. But the confusion also lies in the more specific question of how we should conceptualize what has happened to the Roman state, if indeed anything has really happened to it at all.

Tiberius' oratory captures this. Here as in many Roman tragedies, oratory is the representation of the Roman polity, as regards both its practical workings and its shaping of the Roman mentality, the political paradigm the Romans are imagined as having. In both *Sejanus* and *Catiline*, this representation is particularly important for that historical reconstruction, that 'integrity in the story' (*To the Readers*), which Jonson went to such great lengths to achieve, with the characters' public utterances often tightly bound to what his sources allow them to say. With Tiberius' public speaking, then, we have an egregious case of truth of argument in tension with dignity and utility, for Jonson is making an educated guess as to how Tiberius actually sounded, and his words sound unrelentingly hypocritical. And yet, we cannot be sure how this hypocrisy reflects on the institutions to which the words pay lip-service. Tiberius assures Rome that he knows himself 'The servant of the Senate' and 'their creature' (I.393, 439), and carefully decides on what monuments to himself in the provinces are inappropriate, compliant as he is with the precedents set down by Augustus (465-68), and cognizant that he's but 'mortal, / And can but deeds of men' (475-78). Later, in a similar vein, he addresses the Senate to console Rome mourning the death of his own son, Drusus, enjoining them to maintain proper Roman,

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<sup>12</sup> For the topicality of *Sejanus* and its slipperiness, see for example Annabel Patterson, "'Roman-cast Similitude': Ben Jonson and the English Use of Roman History", in P. A. Ramsey (ed.), *Rome in the Renaissance: The City and the Myth* (Binghamton: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1982), pp. 381-94; Ian Donaldson, *Ben Jonson: A Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp.186-92; Cain, Introduction, *Cambridge Edition*, pp. 199-209.

stately bearing—‘Wherefore sit / Rome’s consuls thus dissolved, as they had lost / All the remembrance both of style and place?’ (III.36-38)—and putting Germanicus’ sons under their custody, equating the boys’ good or ill with ‘the commonwealth’s’ (80-81). Tiberius’ contempt for the cowed Senate and intent to murder the Germanici make the fullness of his performance of Roman statesmanship all the more disturbing, and even when his base motives come closer to the surface, he attends, chillingly enough, to Roman political appropriateness: to slither into a life of debauchery, Tiberius must ‘beg it of this Senate’, and ask that power be ‘reconferred / Upon the consuls’ (III.111-17); to set up Silius’ kangaroo court, Tiberius refers to Roman prosecutorial ‘custom’, and to the capitol, the gods, ‘the dear republic, / Our sacred laws, and just authority’ (III.201-19). Tiberius reduces the entire Roman governing apparatus to mere ornament, as though it can exist as nothing more than an array of topoi for rhetorical amplification; and yet because he cannot not employ this rhetoric, it takes on the force of a framework of ideas. It comes across as a mere script he follows *and* as a condition of his reality.

We are suspended between these two possibilities, and cannot even surely tell which is the better—for if the traditional political system does have substance to it and does ultimately determine what Tiberius can say and do, then it is one that, while it may foster Roman virtue, must also be able to accommodate the rankest tyranny. Jonson keeps us in suspension as to this sense of determinism by having Tiberius conform seamlessly to his conscientious-Roman-statesman role well outside the realm of public oratory. Recruiting Macro as an agent, with no one to overhear, and with Macro more than disposed to pliancy—‘I will not ask why Caesar bids do this, / But joy that he bids me’, says the henchman to himself (III.714-15)—Tiberius nevertheless takes it upon himself to excuse his imminent hedonistic vacation as public service: he goes ‘Not for our pleasures, but to dedicate / A pair of temples, one to Jupiter / At Capua, th’other at Nola, to Augustus, / In which great work, perhaps our stay will be / Beyond our will produced’ (III.671-75). Almost comically, the marching orders essentially grant Macro a free hand for whatever rottenness might be convenient, but the words quasi-officially deputize him as a proxy for the weal public: ‘All thou dost in this / Shall be as if the Senate or the laws / Had giv’n it privilege’ (704-06). Also bordering on the grimly comical is the tortuous letter from the still-vacationing Tiberius to the Senate, its brutally simple gist, Sejanus’ immediate and total destruction, conveyed unmistakably, though through a dense cloud of etiquette-laden verbiage. Safely miles away and immersed in his perversions, his ruthless and bloody command read aloud to the Senate only after Macro has arranged the logistics of Sejanus’ fall, Tiberius has troubled himself to compose his minion’s death-warrant in the deferential terms of administrative procedure: ‘If, conscript fathers, to your more searching wisdoms there shall appear farther cause—or of farther proceeding, either to seizure of lands, goods, or more—it is not our power that shall limit your authority, or our favor that must corrupt your justice’ (V.631-35). These terms can easily appear as a parcel of his sadism, as he can enjoy even from afar the cruelty of enacting an orgy of death through a veneer of civility; and yet, for a final and resounding time, he proves his dedication to his role, despite the craziness of the occasion and despite speaking through someone else’s voice. The letter epitomizes how Roman governmental forms are a front for barbarism, but also the sole stay against it. In fact, in a certain light they comprise a rather potent one, for they place constraints of a sort on Tiberius himself.

The theater of politics leads us, finally, to the theater of philosophy, and the substantiality of the Roman performance of Stoicism. Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar* is the drama’s most incisive

treatment of how the dilemma of Stoicism would tell on the Roman mentality, as both Caesar and Brutus hold themselves to an ideal of constancy of mind, unperturbed by circumstances, and yet might seem to do so mostly to protect the image of Caesar-ness and Brutus-ness; is Caesar genuinely 'constant as the northern star' (III.i.60), or is he assuming a posture of constancy in order to carry himself as Caesar would do? If truly viable as a response to shifts of Fortune—*if*—is Stoicism the expression of inward integrity or of the need to live up to a reputation for such? While Shakespeare's is the subtlest rendering of it, this line of inquiry threads all through Roman tragedy, with the dramatists' historical imagination turning out Romans constantly preoccupied with their constancy of mind and temper.<sup>13</sup> Striking about *The Wounds of Civil War* is how completely under the slippery sway of Fortune the furious antagonists are, even as they lay claim to patience and fortitude. Thus Marius at a low ebb: 'Believe me, lords, I know and am assur'd / That magnanimity can never fear, / And fortitude so conquer silly fate, / As Scilla, when he hopes to have my head, / May hap, ere long, on sudden lose his own' (II.ii.26-30). Report of Young Marius' 'constancy and courage', and 'worthy resolution' as he committed suicide to avoid capture (V.v.66-76), inspires Sulla to a Stoic retirement, admiring the Marii, since 'Nor Fortune's laughs nor lowers their minds could tame' (83). We learn that even the most voracious and malicious Romans are Romans after all, and will invariably assert mind over worldly change; but it also must occur to us that Marius' mind's fortitude is built on hope for a turn-around and for revenge, Sulla's on the annihilation of enemies, and Young Marius' on imitation of Cato (V.v.57), the anachronism here (Cato died a long while afterward) suggesting how commonly Roman Stoic comportment was thought of as a following of models. In *The Roman Actor*, ironically enough considering the play's theme of *theatrum mundi*, committed Stoics do achieve an immunity to Fortune, one not predicated on any desire for praise, but this philosophical authenticity has a high price. The Stoic innocents are an affront to the mad emperor with their 'passive fortitude' (I.i.118), the philosophers' smiling at his tortures a torture to him, and a mockery of his mockery at 'the Stoicks frozen principles' (III.ii.71-89). But in a way they do seem frozen, consigning good persons to sheer victimhood, if indeed they seem practicable by any warm-blooded person at all. Stoicism is appropriate to Romans, then, but it can entail performativity on one side and helplessness or inhumanity on the other. We see instances of each in *Tiberius*: Germanicus' self-mastery against ambition is won by his considering what the legions love in him, what makes his virtue shine, and what affords him honor (577-84); meanwhile, as we'd expect in Roman tragedy, Celsus' method of declaring truth to himself and defiance of Tiberius is to kill himself, since 'My minde was neuer feuer-shooke with feare / Of Meagre death, lifes due priuation' (3173-74).

The Stoicism of the Stoical Romans in the drama thus has divergent strands to it, and this we certainly see in *Sejanus*.<sup>14</sup> With Arruntius' paean to 'godlike Cato' and 'constant Brutus', we've already noted how in the play's early-going, distinctly Roman virtue is explicitly identified with Stoicism. Cato's Romanness shows through, as usual, in his suicide, by which he triumphed over Caesar and chose heroically 'As not to live his slave, to die his master' (I.92); Brutus when he assassinated Caesar proved

<sup>13</sup> For a thorough discussion see Geoffrey Miles, *Shakespeare and the Constant Romans* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996).

<sup>14</sup> For Jonson's concept of Stoicism as applied to *Sejanus*, see for example Katharine Eisaman Maus, *Ben Jonson and the Roman Frame of Mind* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), pp. 3-18, 31-39; Adriana McCrea, *Constant Minds: The Lipsian Paradigm in England, 1584-1650* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), pp. 138-70, esp. 163-68.

himself utterly incorruptible, pure 'Against all charm of benefits' (93-94). But the darker shades of Stoicism are also in evidence. On the one hand, the play's surviving virtuous and Stoical Romans are uniformly miserable and futile, stretching our acceptance that virtue is its own reward to its absolute limit. Agrippina, Germanicus' widow, refuses to sneak around in an environment teeming with informers, since 'Virtue's forces / Show ever noblest in conspicuous courses' (II.456-57); hence her doom is sealed, as is that of her sons, whom she instructs to 'stand upright, / And though you do not act, yet suffer nobly. . . . What we do know will come, we should not fear' (IV.73-76). She is both impressive and persuasive, in that, composure being the sole avenue to dignity and self-actualization in such vicious times, the few true Romans left ought to strive for it; but therefore, not only must we wonder if such composure is really attainable, but we must also be prepared to locate dignity in silence and self-actualization in self-slaughter. Old Lepidus' managing to survive by 'plain and passive fortitude / To suffer and be silent' (IV.294-95) might seem somewhat less than dignified, and Silius' very public suicide—'The coward and the valiant man must fall; / Only the cause and manner how, discerns them . . . Look upon Silius, and so learn to die', he proclaims (III.334-39)—might not seem so grand a victory. It is applauded only in asides, and when it's denounced as a 'desperate act' (340), we might not wholeheartedly disagree. Moreover, on the other hand, the applause, while silent, raises the idea of theatrics; Silius has staged his Stoic death, and Arruntius reacts in kind: 'Be famous ever for thy great example'. The possible association of Stoicism with display and dramatics is underscored by Tiberius' skill at playing equanimity. His humility act includes aspiring to be counted 'constant in dangers / And not afraid of any private frown / For public good' (I.482-84), his address to the Senate grief-stricken over Drusus includes counseling emotional self-discipline despite 'natural ways' (III.49), and even his withdrawal into his debaucheries includes a whiff of Stoic retirement. 'Well acted, Caesar', thinks Arruntius (III.105).

But perhaps more than anyone else it is the titular character who problematizes the Stoicism of Jonson's Romans. Sejanus is obviously the very inversion of Stoicism, and so bolsters its claims by negative example. A lover of the world, bottomlessly hungry after its fruits, crushed by a sudden turn of Fortune's wheel, he furnishes the play with much of its moralizing capacity. In this way Jonson is able to align truth of argument and sententiousness, for the *de casibus* cautionary tale can be proposed to us through an imagined Stoical Roman sensibility: at Sejanus' spectacular tailspin, Arruntius exclaims, 'Forbear, you things, / That stand upon the pinnacle of state, / To boast your slippery height'; Terentius adds, 'Let this example move th'insolent man / Not to grow proud and careless of the gods' (V.893-95, 898-99). Furthermore, as the quintessential Machiavel, Sejanus provides a counterpoint to such reservations as we may have regarding Stoical self-control and self-presentation; if virtuous Romans like Silius do make a show out of Stoicism, with their self-governance appearing futile, impossible, or self-aggrandizing, this show is much preferable to the foulness of Sejanus. The upstart would-be tyrant is anti-Stoic from opposing directions, excess and defect: he is completely wild with the most bestial passion and completely, horribly rational in calculating every move in his rise to the top, and he is also completely theatrical, with nothing to him but his duplicity, and completely undramatic, increasingly heedless as to the obnoxiousness of his public persona. These variant directions are at one point packed together, in the soliloquy he delivers after being struck by Drusus: his

fury shall admit no shame or mean.

Adultery? It is the lightest ill  
I will commit. A race of wicked acts  
Shall flow out of my anger, and o'erspread  
The world's wide face, which no posterity  
Shall e'er approve, nor yet keep silent—things  
That for their cunning, close and cruel mark,  
Thy father [Drusus', i.e. Tiberius] would wish his, and shall, perhaps,  
Carry the empty name, but we the prize.  
On then, my soul, and start not in thy course. (II.149-58)

Histrionic or not, inhumanly self-controlled or overflowing with passion, this seems appreciably worse than any Stoicism.

And yet, as hinted at by his soul's determination to stay on 'course', Sejanus also ends up semi-fulfilling the cardinal directive of Stoicism, the opposition of self to Fortune. As is becoming for an anti-Stoic, Sejanus gleefully blasphemes all the gods except for Fortune—religion is only for 'excellent fools', but 'Her indeed I adore' (V.69-89)—which is basically tantamount to his worshipping himself and solidifying his confidence in his climb. But when, in an omen terrifying for the other Romans witnessing the ceremony to her, his statue of Fortune supernaturally averts her face from him, Sejanus is shaken, but not terrified—and soon, regaining something akin to composure, he openly rejects her: 'Be thou dumb, scrupulous priest, / And gather up thyself, with these thy wares, / Which I, in spite of thy blind mistress, or / Thy juggling mystery, religion, throw / Thus scorned on the earth' (V.190-94). Jonson tries to enfold this rejection into Sejanus' general scoffing at the gods, but it is not quite the same. Though Sejanus is becoming even more thoroughly mired in worldliness, losing his only tenuous tie to a transcendent principle, he nevertheless also comes weirdly close to that disdain for submission to the world's instability, and that insistence on self-definition, which mark Stoicism. His outrageous pride is not Stoicism, but we seem invited to think on how there might be overlap between them. With his throwing down the blind goddess's statue, liberating himself from her influence, and holding himself far above and beyond her, is Sejanus' stance toward Fortune so much at odds with what a true Roman's should be? And if not, does this mean that Roman values were excellent enough to give a fiend like Sejanus a trace of nobility? Or does it mean that, since those values had their inadequacies, we should qualify our urge to emulate them?

Other Roman tragedies, including all of Shakespeare's and Jonson's own *Catiline*, seem more optimistic than *Sejanus* does toward human nobility, but they almost always in some fashion elicit similar questions about it, as well as about what message to glean from the moral and political Rome they present for us. What I have argued here is that the historical dimension in such presentations gives a special edge to this questioning. Few made as painstaking an effort at historical reconstruction as did the scholarly Jonson, but such reconstruction, trying to take into account the imagined Romans' historical, political, and philosophical frame of mind, is a defining feature of Roman tragedy, as are its

vagarious results. We meet a Roman world much bigger and much better, and yet much smaller and meaner, than anyone else's world.