

THE PHILOSOPHER'S
TOOTHACHE

RETHINKING THE EARLY MODERN

Series Editors

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THE PHILOSOPHER'S TOOTHACHE

*Embodied Stoicism in
Early Modern English Drama*



DONOVAN SHERMAN



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THE PHILOSOPHER'S
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INTRODUCTION



More Things

Philosophy teaches us to act, not to speak.

—Seneca

Seneca offers this dictum as a form of consolation to his friend and pupil Lucilius, the addressee of the philosopher's *Letters on Ethics*. This particular letter begins with exasperation. "For it will be to my credit," Seneca claims, "if I manage to extricate you from that place where you are now floundering without any hope of escape."¹ Lucilius is struggling, and Seneca's advice is to focus on action, not speeches. As he does throughout his correspondence, Seneca expresses distaste for overreliance on words, the very medium of his expression. It is in actions, he insists, that philosophy resides. And only by living, rather than simply expounding on, philosophy can one calm the paralyzing anxiety that Lucilius feels.

How does one live a philosophy? The question is central to Stoicism, the school for which Seneca is a standard-bearer. The major classical Stoic texts that have survived—preeminently those of Seneca, Epictetus, and Marcus Aurelius, alongside fragments and secondhand descriptions in collections such as Diogenes Laertius's *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers*—all evince a belief that philosophy resides in active and embodied habits and decisions rather than in spoken or written words. The actual goal of Stoicism can be stated simply: to operate by reason alone through the extirpation of all passions, thereby living in complete accord with nature. What complicates the matter is the *how*, not the *what*; the telos of pure reason is so nearly impossible that one needed a radical revision of their entire disposition in order to attempt its attainment. It is in this process of revision that Stoicism thrives—in the actions, cogitations, habits, and decisions by which one focuses on the North Star of the Stoic ideal.

As Pierre Hadot memorably terms it, Stoicism is less a doctrinal system and more a "way of life."² Hadot's influential claim that classical

philosophy resides in the particularities of one's everyday behavior, rather than in a static, intellectual, and textual expression of ideas, encompasses more schools of thought than Stoicism. But for Hadot, Stoicism most vividly realizes the goal of a philosophical life: "For the ancients, but *particularly* for the Stoics," he argues, philosophy was ultimately a way of life, rather than a purely cerebral exercise.³ Why Stoicism? Because of all the ancient philosophies it is the most public, present-focused, and materialistic. As opposed to the Cynics, who divorce themselves from civic obligation, or the Epicureans, who attempt to create their own communities, the Stoics "strive, at the cost of the greatest difficulties, to live their everyday and even their public lives in a 'philosophical' manner."⁴ Furthermore, Stoicism "will insist on the effort needed to pay attention to oneself, the joyous acceptance of the present moment imposed on us."⁵ This focus on the present does not attempt to penetrate the banality of the quotidian stuff of the world in order to realize a metaphysical truth lurking beyond the realm of perception; indeed, as opposed to Platonism and Aristotelianism, Stoicism revels in the immediate materiality of one's surroundings. Rejecting a "model of hierarchy of knowledge and of levels of reality," the Stoic instead celebrates "the representation of an organic unity, in which there is complete copenetration"; as a result, "the distinction between physics, as a science of the sensible world, and a science of the transcendent world of Ideas (that is, Platonic dialectics) or of the gods (theology) is completely abolished."⁶ Stoicism situates itself entirely in practice, and that practice trains the philosopher's eye to remain vigilant and attentive to every detail of the world around them—not a world in a heavenly beyond, nor one hermetically set off from society, but the precise same world in which we live, in all of its seemingly uneventful happenings.

We can deduce from Hadot's account of Stoicism that it bears striking affinities with a medium often placed in opposition to philosophy: the theater. Like the theater, Stoicism utilizes the vessel of the human body as its primary instrument. Similarly, Stoicism asks that we remain "in the moment"—responsive, reactive, attentive to every shift in the energy of a scene. And Stoicism, like theater, needs an audience, a public body scrutinizing and reacting to a performer's actions to provide immediate feedback and accountability. And yet Stoicism does not conform to a traditional view of mimesis; again, contra Platonism, the Stoic's behavior does not view action as mimetic of something abstract, but instead as the sum totality of its immediately observable phenomena. The Stoic does not possess what Martin Puchner deems "the most fundamental tenets of what is usually called Platonism: a disregard of the concrete, embodied,

lived experience and a desire, instead, to ascend to some realm of abstract forms or ideas, pure and simple.”⁷ This is not to say that Stoicism merely accepted the world as is. Indeed, the Stoic needed to train their energy almost exclusively on the ability to discern what is real or false. But this attention was focused *inward*, at the mental representations of reality ushered into cognition by perception. Here, at this level, falsehoods can be distinguished using the almighty power of reason. As Martha Nussbaum explains, Stoicism instructs the philosopher to “suspend her habitual responses, and to turn her gaze upon herself, becoming watchful and critical of each impression that she is inclined to accept.”⁸ It is within the mind that theater’s traditionally mimetic powers can be ascertained, on the stage of consciousness.

Viewed this way, the Stoic writing that has survived operates less like holistic explanations of thinking and more like scripts for proper behavior. Texts such as Seneca’s *Letters* or Marcus’s *Meditations* do not contain thorough and cogently organized principles; they operate as prompts for readers to perform in a certain way. Reading and rereading passages from these works, then absorbing them as techniques of self-monitoring so as to curate one’s behavior, constitutes a regimen akin to that of an aspiring marathon runner who regularly jogs, adjusts their diet, and stretches. This is barely an analogy, in fact: the Stoics referred to the implied behavior of their audience as *askesis*, or “exercise.” Marcus’s reader was himself, and he examined his *Meditations* daily not to learn new information but as a way to expand his capacity to act in a proper manner. One such meditation reads: “Am I accomplishing some action? I accomplish it, relating it to the well-being of mankind. Is something happening to me? I greet it, relating what happens to me to the gods and to the source of all things, whence is formed the framework of events.”⁹ This frequent attentiveness to activity inspires abundant theatrical analogies in Stoic works. “Remember,” Epictetus implores in his *Handbook*, “that thou art an actor in a play of such a kind as the teacher may choose; if short, of a short one, if long, of a long one.”¹⁰ To absorb this aphorism properly, one must live it, not simply understand and recite it. Life must become worthy of scrutiny and curation, capable of distillation into behavior that stems solely from reason so as to become virtuous—a term that in Stoic terminology means “to realize complete capacity, to attain potential.”¹¹ Behind Seneca’s admonition to Lucilius is this core belief of Stoicism: to live a happy life, one must not seek refuge in moribund words, but instead pay attention to the life they are already living, the actions they are taking.

After its initial flourishing in antiquity, Stoicism regained popularity in the early modern era, and particularly in England, a culture that witnessed

a surge in theatrical activity. Yet the intensely theatrical nature of Stoicism disappeared in this reincarnation. When Stoicism reappeared in early modern England, in fact, it came to represent precisely the opposite position. Rather than advocating a focus on lived experience, it appeared to advocate for cerebral detachment. Rather than distrusting words as the medium of philosophy, it located itself almost entirely within discourse. The entry on Seneca in William Baldwin's popular collection *Treatise on Morall Philosophy*, first printed in 1547, approvingly notes that "hee wrote in his life time many goodly bookes, out of the which shall bee picked some of the most pithie sentences, both of Precepts and counsailes, and also of Proverbs, Wages, Parables, Semblables which in their places heereafter shall follow."¹² Seneca's thought is here reduced to nothing more than the words he produced—words that he explicitly warns against reading as expressive of philosophy. The "pithie sentences" that Baldwin celebrates refers to *sententiae*, sayings familiar to students who would have copied them by rote in their humanist education. Similarly, and despite Epictetus's endorsement of the theater as an apt analogy for virtuous living, the early modern Stoic often gains visibility as an archetypally unmoving, stuffy killjoy resistant to theatrical legibility—so much so that the Stoic emerges as a stock comic character on the actual stage. In perhaps the most self-aware example of this type, Ben Jonson's *Bartholomew Faire* features Adam Overdo, a justice of the peace, strapped into the stocks for public pain and humiliation; when asked if he suffers, he replies, "I do not feel it, I do not think of it, it is a thing without me," which leads a passerby to exclaim, "What's here? A stoic i'the stocks? The fool is turned philosopher."¹³ Foolish denial of obvious fact becomes synonymous with the apparent Stoic denial of felt sensation.

This disdain is in part spiritual. Augustine exemplifies an early Christian critique of Stoicism in *The City of God* when he claims that its typical practitioner is "crippled, wracked with pain, visited by every imaginable affliction, driven at last to take his own life."¹⁴ While the Stoics did argue for suicide as an ethically defensible decision, Augustine mocks this choice as the result of withstanding, Overdo-like, extreme pain. Calvin resurrects the figure of the tortured Stoic in his *Institutes*:

You see that to bear the cross patiently is not to have your feelings altogether blunted, and to be absolutely insensible to pain, according to the absurd description which the Stoics of old gave of their hero as one who, divested of humanity, was affected in the same way by adversity and prosperity, grief and joy; or rather, like a stone, was not affected by anything. And what did they gain by

that sublime wisdom? They exhibited a shadow of patience, which never did, and never can, exist among men. No, rather by aiming at a too exact and rigid patience, they banished it altogether from human life.¹⁵

To be a Stoic, in this description, is to be inhuman, in denial of all emotion in exchange for a “shadow of patience” that cannot last. In fact, Calvin argues, by attempting to attain wisdom, the Stoics became foolish and hubristic. Even Neo-Stoics, those early moderns who sought to synthesize ancient thought with contemporary religion, admitted to the philosophy’s insufficient capacity for grace. Joseph Hall, in *Heaven upon Earth*, laments that even Seneca, the wisest (in Hall’s mind) of the philosophers, lacked deliverance: “No marvell, then,” Hall concludes, “if al the heathen have diligently sought after it; many, wrot of it; none attained it. Not Athens must teach this lesson, but Jerusalem.”¹⁶ We are far, in these accounts, from the Stoic portrayed quite clearly in the ancient source material: the pupil who trains their mind and body to remain attentive and purposeful in their behavior, who turns to texts for dynamic interaction, and who imagines an audience to their every action. Instead, we have graceless, senseless fools who produce a smattering of wise aphorisms but fail to offer a viable mode of perceiving the world, much less a way of life.

This book recovers Stoicism as a vibrant way of life in a time and place that attempted to hammer it into a more schematic and textually dependent system. I argue that we can find in the dramatic work of early modern England the original understanding of the philosophy. To do so, I propose we take Seneca at his word and think of early modern Stoicism just as its classical forbears did: as a performance. I diverge, then, from the impressive range of scholarship on the topic that ends up reifying its stereotype by analyzing Stoicism as a set of stable principles. Many influential accounts of early modern Stoicism have informed my study, and I engage with their work throughout the readings that follow; however, few such analyses commit to an understanding of Stoic philosophy as a mode of performance, and none explicitly links this performance to the theater. Looming large in any bibliography of the early modern Stoics is Gordon Braden’s *Renaissance Tragedy and the Senecan Tradition: Anger’s Privilege*, a brilliant elaboration of how Stoicism’s obsessive focus on self-cultivation, in an effort to extirpate the passions, operates as an internalized imperial drive and in turn results in an external expression of all-consuming anger. Braden’s work culminates in a long reading of Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, but his primary archive is Senecan drama rather than Stoic philosophy, more broadly conceived. Braden falls into

a long and distinguished genealogy of scholarship on the influence of Seneca on early modern drama, a repository that includes works by J. W. Cunliffe, F. L. Lucas, Otto Regenbogen, A. J. Boyle, Robert Miola, and T. S. Eliot.

There have been recent notable studies of Neo-Stoicism and early modern adaptations of Stoic philosophy, though I agree with Joseph Campana that “a relatively small body of scholarship on Renaissance neo-Stoicism and English literature exists.”¹⁷ Andrew Shifflet’s *Stoicism, Politics, and Literature in the Age of Milton: War and Peace Reconciled* stands out as a more nuanced reading of Stoicism, viewing it not merely as a sagacious extreme of unattainable wisdom but as a more processual set of habits; however, as his title indicates, his study focuses on the late seventeenth century and takes up the written word, not the theater, as his site of inquiry. Gerhard Oestrich’s *Neostoicism and the Early Modern State* studies the political, not performative, implications of Neo-Stoicism. Similarly, Patrick Gray’s recent study of Stoicism and Shakespearean drama recovers the political implications of the early modern critique of classical conceptions of “constancy.” My primary aim here, however, is not to view Stoicism as a stable set of principles that can serve as a cohesive doctrine to be critiqued. Nor do I explore the wider ramifications of Stoic philosophy with respect to issues of sovereignty or republicanism. Instead, I examine the more immediate consequences of the theater, as a place of philosophical work, on the individuals and communities who witness it. I also avoid analyzing Seneca’s drama, which clearly influences the dramaturgy of early modern revenge tragedy in readily apparent ways. I am more interested in something subtler but no less powerful: how early modern drama stages Stoic philosophy *as* theater, not how it follows Stoic models or represents Stoic ideas. Rather than ask whether a certain character is Stoic, or whether Stoic ideas appear supported by the text’s formal elements, or identify Stoic sentiments in the dialogue, I will see how dramatic texts, when realized as theatrical presentations, operate as Stoic exercises, like Marcus’s meditations.

While education and Christianity attempted to wring Stoicism of its vital and performed nature, another, less heralded factor is at play. Too often, early modern readers of Stoicism conflated the Stoic sage with the Stoic *tout court*. It is the sage that Seneca, in the letter to Lucilius that opens this introduction, identifies as the rare figure who can align their words with their actions. Seneca claims that in theory, “actions should be in accordance with words” and that a person “should be the same in all places, a match for himself.” He then asks, as if anticipating Lucilius’s incredulity, “‘Is there any such person?’ Not many, but there are some. It

is indeed difficult.”¹⁸ William Irvine, in surveying Stoic thought, notes that its proponents “talk about sages primarily so they will have a model to guide them in their practice of Stoicism. The sage is a target for them to aim at, even though they will probably fail to hit it.”¹⁹ The sage is necessarily a nearly impossible figure to emulate—someone who has extirpated their passions and proceeds purely from reason, carefully parsing out their actions accordingly. This is the figure admittedly ripe for parody, as exemplified by Cicero’s reference, in his *Tusculan Disputations*, to Anaxagoras’s reaction to the news of his child’s death: “I was already aware that he was mortal.”²⁰ But even in the case of the sage, Stoics did not advocate for *not* feeling. One must still absorb sensations in order to evaluate them. Michel de Montaigne, one of the more sensitive early modern readers of Stoicism, picked up on this quality in his earlier essays, before his eventual shift to skepticism. The Stoics, Montaigne explains in “Of Constancy,” do not mean to say

that the soul of their sage can resist the first visions and fancies that come upon him; rather they consent that he give in, as to a natural subjection, to the great noise of the heavens or of a falling building, for example, to the point of turning pale and tightening up. Likewise for the other passions, provided that his judgment remains sound and entire, that the seat of his reason suffers no injury or alteration, and that he lends no consent to his fright and suffering. For the man who is not a sage it goes the same way for the first part, but entirely differently for the second.²¹

Montaigne recognizes that the difference between sage and pupil is whether feelings penetrate to the level of reason, not whether the feelings exist at all. Sages register affect; they become as pale and tense as anyone, but they are capable of realizing that these sensations do not have any effect on their capacity for judgment. Martha Nussbaum, in a close reading of what she calls the “wonderful phenomenological descriptions” of the early Stoics, clarifies this point. The various accounts of attempts to uproot the passions “show us that the Stoics are not neglecting the way passions feel. What they insist is that, in each case, the thing that feels like this is an act of assent or acknowledgment. Some recognitions feel like embracing a nail; others like rubbing yourself across a rough, grating surface; other propositions ‘cut’ differently, so other acceptances have a different phenomenological content.”²² To practice Stoic philosophy is to acknowledge passions as they inundate one’s consciousness. Thus the Stoic must experience the physical sensations symptomatic of poor

judgments before they either exorcise them from their soul or allow their judgment to be clouded.

Most aspiring Stoics follow the latter path. Stoic *askesis* can last a lifetime and most likely will end in failure, but this failure designates a feature of the practice as it brings the philosopher closer to, not further from, a greater sense of embodied humanity. The Stoics hold that, in Nussbaum's words, "life, if we attach ourselves to it, alienates us from our own humanity."²³ This paradox is worth sitting with: Stoic detachment from things we cannot control—*adiaphora*, things indifferent, independent of our reason—in fact allows for intimacy with what is essentially human, the rational soul. The only way to gain this intimacy is to act with the integrity born from rigorous self-examination so as to create a philosophical way of life.

Witness, however, the specific linkage between Stoicism and *not* feeling put forth by Leonato, in Shakespeare's *Much Ado about Nothing*, as he brushes off attempts to console him:

I pray thee peace; I will be flesh and blood.
For there was never yet philosopher
That could endure the toothache patiently,
However they have writ the style of gods
And make a push at chance and sufferance.²⁴

I will have much more to say about this play later in the book, but for now, suffice it to say that Leonato's insult depends on the Stoic's apparent hypocrisy in writing divine words but reeling at the pain of a simple toothache. And yet the dynamic put forth by the Stoics themselves was the inverse: they put little faith in words and advocated for an open, present-tense acknowledgment of the feelings that accost their bodies and souls. To have a toothache was not a hindrance to philosophy; instead, the toothache could in fact inaugurate a philosophical exercise—a dash of physical pain that prompts introspection and self-exploration.

In focusing an inquiry into Stoicism on physicality, rather than solely on the intellect, this book accordingly considers early modern drama not only as a collection of textual records but as something inextricably linked to bodily realization. As such, the discipline of performance studies greatly informs my practice of reading drama. Diana Taylor offers a lucid explanation of the field's objects and methods: "Performance,' on one level, constitutes the object/process of analysis in performance studies, that is, the many practices and events—dance, theater, ritual, political rallies, funerals—that involve theatrical, rehearsed, or conventional/

event-appropriate behaviors”; at the same time, “performance also constitutes the methodological lens that enables scholars to analyze events *as* performances. Civic obedience, resistance, citizenship, gender, ethnicity, and sexual identity, for example, are rehearsed and performed daily in the public sphere.”²⁵ Notably missing from this list of examples is anything traditionally theatrical—anything that takes place on a stage. Instead, performance studies grants the same dignity and capacity for meaning-making to more broadly conceived enactments that occur outside of the theater building. Furthermore, as Taylor hints at here, the performance scholar does not apprehend these enactments simply as plays that happen to take place elsewhere. Instead, drawing on anthropology, speech act theory, and phenomenology, performance studies allows for greater explanatory power than merely extending theater as a metaphor. Richard Schechner, whose collaborations with the anthropologist Victor Turner provided foundational work in the discipline, defines performance as “restored behavior,” a capacious term that encompasses all actions that are “marked, framed, or heightened.” To restore behavior is to offset it somehow by changing its formal components or altering the way we view it. Thus, it “can be worked on, stored and recalled, played with, made into something else, transmitted, and transformed.”²⁶

Thinking of Stoicism as performance, in this understanding, helps solve a potential problem with my earlier claim that Stoicism bears affinities with the theater. It is more accurate to say that Stoicism mobilizes a theatrical *vocabulary* in its exercises. The actual activity of Stoic *askesis* does not make for riveting action: Marcus sitting at his study, closing his eyes and visualizing his day, does not arrest an audience’s attention. Rather, while the Stoic exercise is not itself theater, it renders life theatrical. The critical generosity of performance studies, whereby every behavior can be rendered worthy of scrutiny if framed as such, finds a classical antecedent in Stoicism’s exhortation to imagine the world as irreducibly material but nonetheless—or perhaps especially—deserving of intense study and prompt for reflection. Unlike Taylor and Schechner, however, I will not be studying live performance as my primary object. Instead, I will be reading dramatic texts as repositories of the Stoic performances wrung out of the philosophy’s early modern textual adaptations and translations. I contend that the Stoic way of life lived on in theater even as it appeared to die elsewhere. As such, I will read the potential enactment of drama as a rehearsal of a Stoic exercise on its hypothetical audience. Like Stoicism, the theater depends on bodies for its full realization. In this way, drama bears a keen resemblance to Stoic texts, which are insufficient and incomplete remnants of a particular way of life.

Stoic performance, then, smuggles into drama, a medium of representation, a distinctly nonmimetic set of practices. Rather than a person taking on a character, or accessing a metaphysical realm, *askesis* outlines their life as already deserving of close attention. This quality compelled Michel Foucault, in his lectures at the Collège de France, to turn to Stoicism as an early example of the “art of living” (*tekhne tou biou*), a range of ancient practices that, in Foucault’s genealogy, will coalesce into modern technologies of biopolitics. One quality of Stoic *askesis* that Foucault highlights is its grammar of aestheticization, of rendering the self as a formal creation of the self through repeated acts of distancing and focusing. To this poetics is wedded the nontranscendental quality observed by Hadot, an irreducibility of the body that provides the goal of Stoic philosophical work. Foucault, a great admirer of Hadot, elaborates that for the Stoics, as opposed to Platonists or Christians, “the self is the agent, object, instrument, and end of salvation.”²⁷ There is no release from the tangible elements of scrutiny. The Stoic highlights their behavior without elevating it; they call attention to their performance to accord with nature, but stop short of attempting to instrumentalize the self as a gateway to sublimity. One prescription for this nontheatrical theatricality—without artifice, in accordance to nature, yet bounded as distinct from the aleatory noise of the everyday—might look like this:

Be not too tame neither, but let your own discretion be your tutor. Suit the action to the word, the word to the action, with this special observance, that you o’erstep not the modesty of nature. For anything so o’erdone is from the purpose of playing, whose end, both at the first and now, was and is to hold as ’twere the mirror up to nature; to show virtue her feature, scorn her own image and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure.²⁸

Hamlet’s advice to the players brims with Stoic terminology: the action and word must be wedded, as Seneca urges Lucilius; performance must realize the full capacity of its nature; virtue and scorn must be parsed out carefully. A caution to avoid melodrama doubles as a prescription for philosophical practice.

I want to linger on Hamlet to consider briefly his Stoicism—or, more accurately, to consider how to consider his Stoicism. The critical reception has largely found him to be, in Alan Sinfield’s phrase, a “failed Stoic.”²⁹ While the play features copious clear references to Stoic texts, alongside a more broad and structural inheritance of Senecan revenge tragedy, Hamlet himself usually warrants mention as a quasi-Stoic at

best. Joshua Scodel finds that Hamlet “radically deflates” Stoic ideas and “render[s] inapplicable” one of the “key tenets of Stoicism: that we can assert rational control over our thoughts and thereby make ourselves psychologically free.”³⁰ This is surely true if we hold Stoicism to reside in a set of static principles—in “tenets.” But Hamlet’s failure to adhere to the near-impossibility of absolute rational control marks him precisely *as* a Stoic, one who attempts the practice of philosophy without ever attaining sagacity. The critical conflation of sage and pupil is made clear in Geoffrey Aggeler’s claim that the “attitude of Hamlet himself toward Stoicism and its embodiment in the Stoic sage is obviously ambivalent.”³¹ The offhand equivalence of the philosophy with its ideal covers over a considerable gap of practice, one in which Hamlet resides.

The play continually lobs Stoic maxims at Hamlet, beginning with the half-hearted fragments of *consolatio* spoken by his mother and stepfather. “Thou know’st ’tis common,” announces Gertrude, “all that lives must die, / Passing through nature to eternity” (1.2.72–73). After Hamlet waves this attempt away, Claudius embarks on a longer explanation that because “your father lost a father,” Hamlet’s persistence in “obstinate condolment” commits “a fault to heaven, / A fault against the dead, a fault to nature, / To reason most absurd, whose common theme / Is death of fathers” (2.1.89, 93, 101–4). As many editors point out, Claudius sounds a Stoic note in his echo of Seneca: “Let a person make his exit according to his own inclination. Whether he prefers the sword or the noose or some poison that spreads through the bloodstream, let him go forward with it and break the bonds of servitude.”³² Interpreting this as a prescriptive declaration, we can easily label Hamlet a failure. But this would not accurately give a sense of the Stoic way of life, just its tidy encapsulation—the kind of overly simplistic reflection of principle that leads Hamlet to call Rosencrantz a “sponge” that “soaks up the King’s countenance, his rewards, his authorities” (4.3.15). To be a sponge is to passively absorb, to copy by rote, to carry a message from its origin to its destination without reflection or admission of lived experience—precisely the kind of unreflective and dutiful rehearsal of Stoic trope by Claudius.

By contrast, Hamlet himself largely avoids the simplicity of *sententiae* and instead conducts a series of Stoic exercises: he meditates on his own death, questions the virtue of his behavior, and trains an eye on his actions as if he were an actor. These are not distinctly Stoic qualities, of course: it was Plato who famously claimed that “true philosophers make dying their profession.”³³ What makes Hamlet such a compelling candidate for Stoicism in particular is his insistent avoidance of the transcendental coupled with his habitual turn inward, to question his reception of the

truth, rather than outward, to question the nature of external appearances. When his passions overtake him, he habitually interrogates his motivations, attempting with increasing desperation to re-anchor his behavior in reason—and, famously, question whether reason ultimately dictates his decisions. Furthermore, he does so in active contrast to the purely textual philosophical sentiments that he encounters. This dynamic gains its clearest expression in Hamlet's relationship to Horatio, perhaps the best known Stoic in the early modern canon. On the parapets of the castle, after witnessing the return of the ghost of Hamlet, Sr., Horatio exclaims that the scene of Hamlet's giddy, compulsive urges to swear silence is "wondrous strange"; Hamlet replies that there "are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, / Than are dreamt of in your philosophy" (1.5.173, 174–75). Hamlet's "your" orients the critique at Horatio's particular mode of thinking, one that balks at accommodating the fantastic into its scheme. Crucially, Hamlet does not evince distaste for Horatio's ideas, but believes they lack a worldly component that engages with them: Horatio hesitates to incorporate into his worldview an account of what occurs in front of him. Rather than philosophize in the ethereal realm of ideas, Hamlet, a "quintessence of dust," locks into the here and now, the immediate materiality of his surroundings (2.2.308). And yet he still recognizes and admires Horatio's idealism—he just recognizes it as such, a sagacious goal rather than a realistic practice. Thus Hamlet's encomium before the "Mousetrap" scene, where he celebrates Horatio as

one, in suff'ring all, that suffers nothing,
 A man that Fortune's buffets and rewards
 Hast ta'en with equal thanks; and blest are thou
 Whose blood and judgment are so well commedled
 That they are not a pipe for Fortune's finger
 To sound what stop she please. Give me that man
 That is not passion's slave, and I will wear him
 In my heart's core, ay, in my heart of heart,
 As I do thee. (3.2.66–74)

Hamlet takes the model Stoicism of Horatio and wears it in his heart as inspiration to attempt to refuse the overpowering force of his passions. I see this as an encounter akin to Lucilius reading Seneca, or Marcus reading himself: the absorption of an ideal as philosophical prod, a framework for the "more things" that inevitably inundate perception, should we choose—and, contrary to popular belief, the Stoics insist we should choose—to participate in public life, rather than exist in Horatian

reserve. The acknowledgment of the “more things” that stand outside comprehension should be absorbed into one’s disposition, Hamlet suggests, not as ideas to be analyzed but instead as necessarily mysterious realms.

In its admission of mystery, this principle carries theological undertones. Indeed, the replacement of the unknown universe of Stoicism with the unknown mysteries of God provides a signal gesture of the Neo-Stoics. But what makes Hamlet particularly Stoic, rather than Platonic, is his subsequent turn to relentless self-examination coupled with a lack of mimetic escape.³⁴ Hamlet’s turn inward has long been claimed as a prophetic glimpse of modernity, an uncannily relentless self-consciousness that, so the narrative goes, devours the generic demands of the classical revenge plot. By marking and heightening his own actions, however, he also looks backward at ancient practices. Over and over, Hamlet’s passions overtake his reason, but he constantly interrogates *why* this is so and attempts to investigate the source of his actions. He does not see himself as simply an actor—he fails to live up to the imitative virtuosity of the players—but neither does he allow the sensations and habits of his life to slip by unremarked upon; he frames them as they relate to the tenets delivered to him. He tests himself. The key passage in this regard is yet another polite dismissal of his schoolmate, one that again draws clear limits of control and comprehension. After Horatio advises that Hamlet call off his duel with Laertes, Hamlet claims that “[w]e defy augury. There is special providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be now, ’tis not to come; if it be not to come, it will be now; if it be not now, yet it will come. The readiness is all. Since no man, of aught he leaves, knows aught, what is’t to leave betimes? Let be” (5.2.215–20). Hamlet proffers a Stoic exegesis of a biblical passage: because divinity accounts for all events, no matter how humble, we can only “let be.” This final two-word exhortation could either serve as an efficient summation of his attitude or, as Harold Jenkins points out, operate more prosaically as a call for Horatio to stop their conversation as Gertrude, Claudius, and Laertes enter the scene. But even this deflating interpretation amounts to the same basic idea: stop talking, words are not needed. Here we find an echo of Seneca’s distrust of a philosophy grounded in language alone, one that attempts to claim the future through augury, through mastery. Hamlet seizes instead on “readiness,” the ways by which the Stoic pupil trains themselves, through carefully attending to themselves, to engage with the incomprehensible world.

Hamlet fleshes out Lucilius’s side of things. If we take Seneca and his Stoic peers as holistic philosophical articulations, we miss out on the lived

experiences of the philosophy, which is where it actually resides. As G. M. Ross points out, Seneca, in his own time, had “no influence” on the development of “philosophy as a technical discipline” due to his “ambition not to produce new developments in philosophy . . . but to propound and defend the Stoic view of life in a way that would appeal to the layman.”³⁵ It was in the everyday lives of his readers that Seneca wanted his inspiration felt, in the Hamlets of the world more than the Horatios. Likewise, this book follows the Hamlets. Rather than label them failures, or locate in them the overlaying of different discourses, I will view them as active philosophers who embody Stoicism as a set of practices, not as an archive of precepts but in the performance of their attempted incorporation. So, too, will I examine how Stoic performance, as it exists in the drama, makes Hamlets and Luciliuses of us all by upending our expectations and forcing considerations of our own comportment and behavior.

The first chapter broadens the claims I have laid out in this introduction. I examine more deeply the circulation of Stoicism in early modern England, including tracts of Neo-Stoicism, such as Justus Lipsius’s *De constantia*, as well as translations and adaptations of Seneca, Epictetus, and Marcus Aurelius. Reading these not as containers of knowledge to be transferred but instead as prompts for and residue of embodied action—despite efforts by translators and scholars to flatten this dimension—I explain how Stoicism could be interpreted as a performance, rather than an intellectual pursuit. I also describe more thoroughly what Hadot’s notion of a Stoic “way of life” looks like by enumerating the exercises Stoics would do to try to reach this goal, such as meditating on death, questioning intentions, tempting bodily desires, and imagining an audience. Furthermore, the chapter elaborates on how performance works as a useful paradigm for understanding Stoicism because it deemphasizes the figure of the sage (often the actual target of anti-Stoic sentiment) and realizes that actual Stoics were always in training—always, that is, struggling to attain an ideal of control over the passions, rather than successfully doing so. Finally, the chapter introduces the major thinkers who will serve as frequent interlocutors in the case studies that follow.

The second chapter builds on the survey of the first chapter by modeling a way of reading drama as a form of Stoic performance. Specifically, I take up John Marston’s Antonio plays, *Antonio and Mellida* and *Antonio’s Revenge*. Marston’s professed distaste for Stoicism offers recognizably parodic, exaggerated forms of the philosophy in the Antonio plays. However, by repeatedly calling attention to the material conditions of their performance—conditions that, according to satiric convention, promise a kind of failure of dramatic realization—the plays invite a

more nuanced understanding of the Stoic ideas they appear to denounce. Stoicism entails a performative grammar that admits to a life lived in a constructed but unknowable world in which one could die at any moment. The acknowledgment of this “violent fate,” as Lipsius calls it, finds in Marston’s self-aware, continually collapsing, and dramaturgically muddled plays an ideal vehicle.

The third chapter critically analyzes the importance of indifference in *Much Ado about Nothing*, reading Shakespeare’s play alongside one of its possible sources, Baldassare Castiglione’s massively popular *Book of the Courtier*. I uncover a Stoic connection to Castiglione’s work by exploring one of his primary influences, Cicero’s *De oratore*. After tracing this dynamic, I closely read *Much Ado* as a work that, when embodied in performance, continually tempts its audience with questions of authenticity only to reveal a deeply held indifference (*apatheia*) to the question of truth. The play thus mobilizes its theatricality to subject its spectators to a Stoic exercise that teaches us to cultivate a radical indifference to epistemological concerns and instead focus on our ability to absorb reason. Throughout, I draw on Michel Foucault’s lectures on Stoicism at the Collège de France. These lectures have received considerably less attention than Foucault’s more formal published work, particularly as they relate to Stoicism and early modern culture.

The next two chapters shift gears from comedy to tragedy. Chapter 4 reads Cyril Tourneur’s *The Atheist’s Tragedy* as a demonstration of early modern Christianity’s engagement with Stoic physics. I begin with a reading of a paradigmatic encounter of these two belief systems, the speech of Paul at Mars Hill, in Athens, as depicted in Acts 17. Paul’s explanation of divine creation as similar to Stoic cosmology renders the philosophy somewhere between faith and apostasy. This ambivalence is reflected in the unsettled ways that Tourneur’s play defines its titular term; the supposed atheist, D’Amville, engages in material vitalism akin to Stoic physics, while the nominal hero, Charlemont, is rendered so inert in his dutiful fidelity that he becomes less a realization of Christian mystery than a mild repudiation of it. I propose that the play’s theatrical strategy insists on two principles whose opposition reflects the Christian–Stoic tensions of the era: on the one hand, it affirms the energy inherent to materiality; on the other, it continually draws attention to the literal shallowness of its emblematic *mise en scène*.

Chapter 5 takes a critical look at Stoicism’s frequent use of “slavery” as a trope to connote an unhealthy tethering to the passions. I place this understanding of slavery in conversation with the legal and material legacy of slavery that attended the philosophy’s original incarnation

and, in its revival in early modern Europe, began its institutionalization as a global enterprise. I examine *Othello* to propose that the play's frequent invocation of servitude and mastery, coupled with its investment in provoking and interrogating the sources of anger, makes it a profound commentary on how two competing understandings of slavery—moral and legal—can still be intertwined and even codependent, despite the fantasy of contingent bondage put forth by Stoic philosophers. I also examine how *Othello*'s race, the exact contours of which have long been debated by commentators, gains a degree of legibility when we view him as an aspiring Stoic student attempting to control his anger by examining himself as a performer. The perception of his blackness, I argue, withholds him from the proper participation in *askesis*, corrupted as he is by Iago's framing him as overly jealous and "hot," qualities stereotypically associated with his Moorish identity.

Finally, the book's conclusion returns to Hamlet to propose that his shifting sense of identity, murky motivations, and relentless self-examination—all typically seen as markers of his bewildering complexity—all in fact characterize him as an exemplary Stoic pupil, one whose behavior offers a model for how we can think about university teaching today. I then fold this consideration into a reading of Seneca's dismissal of liberal education in his letter 88 in light of our current so-called crisis of the humanities. I explore how Seneca's critique still resonates today by encouraging the incorporation of virtue, in the Stoic sense of a practiced realization of capacity, into the classroom. When thought of as an embodied practice, one typified by Hamlet's behavior, the philosophy gives us resources for thinking through pedagogy. These resources, as articulated in the previous chapters, appear at first blush to be hindrances: unpredictability, indifference, vulnerability, dependence. But if viewed as ways of life that benefit from their practice, rather than as concepts that need to simply be analyzed, these principles gain a beneficial vitality.

We are in a Stoic moment. Silicon Valley CEOs read Marcus Aurelius as a business guru; websites such as the *Daily Stoic* and bestsellers like Ryan Holiday's *Stillness is the Key* purport to find in Stoic philosophy the key to success and happiness; publishers repackage selections of ancient Stoic texts as self-help manuals (*How to Give, How to Keep Your Cool*).³⁶ It would be easy to dismiss these phenomena as misunderstandings, simplifications, or even outright perversions of actual Stoicism. But I believe that, despite their frequent lack of analytical rigor, such efforts deserve to be taken seriously as, at their root, reviving the real aims of the work of Seneca, Marcus, and Epictetus: to have us live the good life. *Living* is a

full-bodied activity; it is not only knowing or thinking. By arguing that this original Stoicism endured in early modern England, a crucial juncture of its global development, I ultimately hope to inspire a broader reevaluation of the inextricability of philosophy and performance, and to provide new ways to study an intellectual tradition as it asked to be studied—suits its word to its action.