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Vangshardt, Rasmus

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MR. RASMUS VANGSHARDT (Orcid ID : 0000-0001-8679-5892)

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Abstract

Antonio's opening claim in *The Merchant of Venice* that he is 'so sad' due to the world stage where he has been given a sad role has often been neglected in the play's reception history. The present analysis begins with an examination of central passages to clarify the role of sadness in relation to the trope of the *theatrum mundi*. It shows that the sadness is persistent and earnest and that this is caused by an understanding of the meaning of the *theatrum mundi*, which has hitherto been overlooked. The article then considers the historical light in which the *theatrum mundi* should be seen in the context of the play with respect to the prior textual analysis. The suggestion is that in relation to both the intellectual history of ideas and to Elizabethan audience-response, the play negotiates a Christian-Stoic version of the *theatrum mundi* without breaking the genre of the comedy and paradoxically not abandoning Antonio's sadness.

Keywords: Shakespeare, The Merchant of Venice, *theatrum mundi*, world theatre, Stoicism, sadness

I. Introduction: Earnest or moody Antonio?

It is a bewildering fact that Antonio, the protagonist of Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* (c. 1596), is so infinitely sad. For the same reason, it seems rather odd, dramatically speaking, that the main part of the play's first scene should focus on this rather uncanny emotional state of the protagonist. However, 1.1 also contains an explanation for Antonio's famous sadness. While Antonio denies that his state of mind could

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have anything to do with 'worldly' problems of money or love, he gives an alternative account, not at all unfamiliar to the Shakespearean tradition in general: Antonio considers the world 'a stage, where every man must play a part,/ And mine a sad one.'¹ (1.1.78-79) Antonio thus evokes the topos of the *theatrum mundi*, especially known through Jacques' words in *As You Like It* (c. 1599): 'All the world's a stage/ And all the men and women merely players.' (2.7.140-41). While Jacques' melancholic world theater has been thoroughly studied and discussed, Antonio's invocation of the image is often overlooked. Yet, when Antonio's understanding of the topos is seen in the perspective of intellectual history and in original Elizabethan context, its Stoic meaning and this Stoicism's relevance to Antonio's trial emerge.

It is tempting to see Antonio's use of the *theatrum mundi* in the same tradition as Jacques': A melancholic outburst, a youthful sentimentalisation of life.² It might be even more tempting in the case of Antonio because he delivers his opening lines in the Early Modern city environment of a capitalist Venice. Several critical editions of the play also comment that the opening scene must take place either in a street or on a quay.³ As these lines are outspoken in the public sphere, we might thus think of Antonio as an early personification of Baudelaire's spleen in the modern city. In this light he becomes a dandy, parading his *Weltschmerz* in a city environment so supremely suited for the show-off of one's affective state of mind.

The metaphor of the *theatrum mundi* is no modern invention – even if the experience of the mask-play of public and social life is also an essential part of the modern drama repertoire. The metaphor has Antique origins and has probably been mediated to Shakespeare through the English Middle Ages and John of Salisbury's *Polycraticus* (1159).⁴ The following argument shows that the relevance and importance of Antonio's sadness and its relation to the *theatrum mundi* cannot be acknowledged if it is only seen as a symptom of (early) modern sentiment. It also implies that the above-mentioned evaluations of this connection have little basis in the work of art we have come to know as *The Merchant of Venice*.

If Antonio's sadness is taken seriously with respect to the plot, his own interpretation of his predicament and his friends' evaluations of the same, a far more serious Antonio emerges whose sad role is the foundation for an admired ideal of constancy. This ideal has often been expounded as a Stoic virtue in Shakespeare, quite openly idealised in the Roman plays but also in *Hamlet's* Horatio. Previous uses of the *theatrum mundi* in other Shakespeare-plays have perhaps made us overlook the fact that the same ideal applies to Antonio – a character whose Venetian upbringing makes him a far more likely Roman Stoic than for instance Horatio. It is not an example of spleen *ante terminum* Baudelaire. It is far closer to the earnest Roman-Stoic origins of the topos.

After an analysis of the textual details of Antonio's sadness and the use of the image of the world theatre, the article will therefore consider these passages in the light of the possible inspirational sources in the history of ideas and lastly discuss how the Elizabethan audience would have perceived

Antonio's sadness in the world theatre of their city. This will be done with the hypothesis that while descriptions of the sad world theatre as urbane or moody are understandable and commonsensical, they might also be too 'modern' evaluations of quite a non-modern textual horizon in the case of some Early Modern works of art. I here follow a path of argument laid down by the medievalist Lee Patterson in his contribution to the study of the so-called 'new medievalism'. In an eloquent critique of both Eagleton and New Historicism's tendency to fetishize the Renaissance as the birthplace of modern man, Patterson sarcastically paraphrases the former:

[Hamlet] stands at the beginning of the period when the 'crippling burden' of subjectivity will be 'disciplined and 'naturalized' into the oppressive unity' of bourgeois humanism. Since we now stand at the end of that period, at a moment 'when that individualist conception of the self will enter into crisis,' we recognize Hamlet as a kindred spirit: he expresses our modernity. (Patterson, 1990, 98)

Even if polemically put, Patterson hits upon something that is quite distinct in the treatment of the Early Modern *theatrum mundi*: Too often it must express our modernity, even when it does not.

II. The world theatre according to Antonio

Antonio, not Shylock, is the 'merchant' to whom the play's title refers, and the drama begins with his expression of sadness. Nevertheless, he is met with attempts at rational – 'modern' if you will – explanation for his sorry state. This is peculiar as Antonio has the opening lines to express his 'want-wit'⁵ sadness:

ANTONIO

In sooth I know not why I am so sad.
It wearies me; you say it wearies you;
But how I caught it, found it or came by it,
What stuff 'tis made of, whereof it is born,
I am to learn; and such a want-wit sadness makes of me,
That I have much ado to know myself. (1.1.1-6)

Antonio underscores the inexplicability of this emotion and its gravity in wearying both him and his friends. The proverb of 'knowing oneself' should have alerted his friends and modern commentators to the relevance and historical weight of what is coming – as the third Arden notices, it is a Shakespearean

proverb with classical origins in the Delphic temple.⁶ This difficulty of introspection (the 'much ado to know oneself') is equally an Antique commonplace.⁷

Antonio's peers are clearly not listening; they certainly ignore the claim of want-wit. Salarino thinks that it is due to the merchant's many ships on the oceans that he worries. They might, after all, sink: 'Your mind is tossing on the ocean,' (1.1.7) and Salanio agrees: 'And every object that might make me fear/ Misfortune to my ventures, out of doubt,/ Would make me sad.' (1.1.19-21) Antonio can easily dismiss such petty explanations. Like the skillful merchant he is, his 'ventures are not in one bottom trusted,' (1.1.41) and therefore 'my merchandise makes me not sad.' (1.1.44) If it is not money, it must be women, his friends reckon: 'Why then, you are in love.' (1.1.45) But it is not that either, Antonio does not even bother to refute such stupidity: 'Fie, fie.' (1.1.46) Delivering positive reasons for the severe experience of sadness, the friends are ignoring Antonio's claim that there will be much more ado in order to ascertain self-knowledge.⁸ Therefore, Antonio denies these 'scientific' or at least positively identifiable explanations for his sadness and instead claims that the author of the so-called world theatre is to blame when he invokes the infamous trope of the *theatrum mundi* in full:

ANTONIO

I hold the world but as the world, Gratiano,
A stage, where every man must play a part,
And mine a sad one. (1.1.77-79)

Antonio thinks that he has been assigned a sad role in the world theatre of Venice. That has at least two ontological consequences. First, something or someone is assigning roles to the play of life, and man has no immediate access to the reasons for this structuring of the universe, and, second, reality has more layers to it than human reason can positively identify.⁹ In this fashion, both Antonio's sadness and Shakespeare's Venice have a theatricalized nature; a non-modern, anti-empiricist fashioning of an Early Modern city. It is as if the play is trying to guide the audience in another direction than the 'modern' one. When the play has shifted to Belmont for a second beginning, it also employs a much more Antique *kosmos*, which mirrors Antonio's opening words:

PORTIA

By my troth, Nerissa, my body is aweary of this great world. (1.2.1-2)

It would have been impossible not to hear the reference to Antonio's own state of mind in the previous scene, and the shift from Venice to Belmont would have underscored the connection.¹⁰ The comment in the second Cambridge edition notes that Portia's sentiment here is a reference to 'the antithesis [which] is the familiar Elizabethan one between a human being as a microcosm and the physical universe as macrocosm.' (Mahood 1987, 65). This is no invocation of the *theatrum mundi* in full, but it is certainly a twinning of Antonio's statement, compatible with the traditional sense in the world theatre of playing a little part in a great play and the vertical orientation of the world when someone must be watching from above.¹¹ Portia is generally very receptive to Antonio's state of mind. Gratiano, for instance, has another explanation for Antonio's sadness in the opening scene besides women and money: 'You have too much respect upon the world:/ They lose it that do buy it with too much care.' (1.1.74-75) That is not true. Antonio has much care but does not lose the world. This shows how even Gratiano's biblical philosophy – the phrase is an allusion to Matthew 16, 5-26 – in the opening scene is as misguided as the explanations of money and women. It is Portia who will show herself somewhat wiser:

How little is the cost I have bestowed
In purchasing the semblance of my soul
From out the state of hellish cruelty. (3.4.19-21)

She knows that her money and deeds will perhaps rescue Antonio, but she does not think it will change him. It will nonetheless ensure that the world theatre does not always produce tragedies but is capable of comedy. Perhaps she paradoxically knows this because she is world-weary.

III. The world theatre in the structure of the play

It should be remembered that the dominant emotions of the play are Antonio's lasting sadness and Shylock's resentfulness. Sadness is plot-structuring, but the drama is still a *comedy*, classified as such in the First Folio. When Antonio's ships at first do not return, he cannot pay back on time, and Shylock can therefore bring him before the duke of Venice. One could here suspect that there was not really a problem, as does Salanio at 3.3.24-25. There is a hefty antisemitism in the city, and Antonio is a respectable Christian citizen, so why should the duke not simply ignore the law and deny Shylock his bond? Once again, this is the sentiment of the 'rational' friends. Only Antonio is calm with reference to both reason and his sadness:

The Duke cannot deny the course of law;
For the commodity that strangers have

With us in Venice, if it be denied,
Will much impeach the justice of the state,
Since that the trade and profit of the city
Consisteth of all nations. Therefore, go;
These griefs and losses have so bated me
That I shall hardly spare a pound of flesh
Tomorrow to my bloody creditor.
Well, jailer, on. Pray God Bassanio come
To see me pay his debt, and then I care not. (3.4.26-36)

Thus, it is the blossoming capitalism of Venice that renders all equal before the law. Almost everyone – except Antonio and perhaps the duke – appears ready to dispose of this fair and prosperous setup if it can save their friend. The only one who keeps calm is the protagonist. This earnestness is also present before the catastrophe of the sunken ships. Already in 2.8, we hear that

SALARINO

A kinder gentleman treads not the earth.

[...]

SALANIO

I think he [Antonio] only loves the world for him. [Bassanio]

I pray thee, let us go out and find him out,

And quicken his embraced heaviness

With some delight or other. (2.8.36-54)

Antonio is never described as moody or sentimental in the text. On the contrary, his 'heaviness' motivates good deeds and calmness. Yet even the third Arden commentary believes exclusively in the interpretation of the friends. They think that some random 'delight or other' can help Antonio out of his sadness, yet the sadness was there before any imaginable delight was missing from his life if 1.1 is taken literally. There is no textual evidence that Antonio became sad because of his misfortune. His own words claim the opposite. He has embraced his heaviness because his role is sad.¹²

This unwillingness to take seriously Antonio's own words underscoring the earnestness of the world theater is odd. Before the duke, Antonio states his willingness to face the punishment in the light of Shylock's just claim and tyranny of spirit:

I do oppose

My patience to his fury, and am armed
To suffer with a quietness of spirit,
The very tyranny and rage of his. (4.1.9-14)

The willingness to sacrifice and the ability to a dignified response to the terrors of reality develop out of Antonio's sadness, both melted in to the concept of being 'armed with a quietness of spirit' when suffering comes. That 'quietness of spirit' is a much better expression for the emotion of sadness in the play. As shown in the next section, it can be seen as a low-key idealisation of Stoic ethics. At Antonio's supposed farewell scene, the sense of an Antique rather than modern understanding for the meaning and relevance of his sadness once more arises.

PORTIA [in disguise]

You, merchant, have you anything to say?

ANTONIO

But little. I am armed and well prepared.
Give me your hand, Bassanio. Fare you well,
Grieve not that I am fall'n to this for you:
For herein Fortune shows herself more kind
Than is her custom. [...]
Commend me to your honourable wife;
Tell her the process of Antonio's end,
Say how I loved you, speak me fair in death,
And, when the tale is told, bid her be judge
Whether Bassanio had not once a love. (4.1.260-273)

At least two elements are of importance here. First, the idea that Antonio is 'armed' is an allusion to his statement to the duke that he is armed with 'quietness of spirit.' This is clearly a textual evidence of constancy in Antonio, and the question arises: Would a moody pessimist be capable of such serious outburst of love? Second, we see a possible brilliant doubling of the original perspective of the *theatrum mundi*. 'When the tale is told' is Antonio's reference to the opening of the play at a point where he thinks

the end of it is coming. 'When the tale is told' means here both Bassanio's account of Antonio's life, but of course also the very death of Antonio: When the tale is told in the world theater, you die. This doubling can only be upheld, if it is accepted that the concept of 'the tale' is equated with the idea of the play, but there are also good textual reasons to do so with respect to the *theatrum mundi*. For instance, the same logic is at play in *Richard II*, another Shakespearean invocation of the metaphor, which is more evasive than it seems. Death as the unmasker of the play of life is clear in Richard's famous idea of death kings:

'All murder'd: for within the hollow crown
That rounds the mortal temples of a king
Keeps Death his court and there the antic sits,
Scoffing his state and grinning at his pomp,
Allowing him a breath, a little scene.' (3.2.160-64)

The connection between told, sad stories, death and the world theatre is equally relevant, giving an intratextual argument for Shakespeare's willingness to connect the two. Gaunt uses his most important moment in the play to sigh over 'death's sad tale' (2.1.16) and Richard reaches his poetical climax with the wish to spend his time grieving the 'sad stories of the death of kings' (3.2.156) just before his invocation of the *theatrum mundi*. There is thus a tendency towards metonymical displacements between images of 'tale' and 'play' in two different uses of the world theatre in Shakespeare.¹³

IV. Shakespeare and Stoicism

It should by now be clear how the text itself does not render Antonio's original claim immature or superfluous. The next step is to consider which prism from the intellectual history of ideas becomes relevant through these textual observations in trying to understand the functions of the *theatrum mundi* in this seminal Early Modern drama. It is not radical or 'new' to suggest the relevance of Stoic ways of thinking about Shakespeare's plays. There is a long tradition for doing so and a more recent thorough discussion of the relevance of doing it. In 1893, John W. Cunliffe wrote the dissertation *The Influence of Seneca on Elizabethan Tragedy*, and T.S. Eliot popularized the discussion with two essays from 1927, "Seneca in Elizabethan Translation" and "Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca." What Shakespeare is likely to have read from the classic canon, especially in relation to his grammar school years, was carefully studied by T.W. Baldwin in his *William Shakespeare's Small Latine and Lesse Greeke* (1944).

After the Second World War, criticism began to appear on the relevance of 'Stoicism' in Shakespeare. Hunter (1967), Monsarrat (1984) and Hartford (1990; 1993) all criticized the weak notions of

Stoicism used in many of the previous studies. Hunter claimed that it was only Seneca's drama, not his prose, that would be relevant to Shakespeare studies, whereas Monsarrat and Hartford took a more doctrinal approach, showing how acclaimed 'Stoic' ideology in Shakespeare never followed the doctrines exposed in Stoic sources. Gordon Hartford is admirably clear about his position:

While it might be right to mention courage in the face of death as a feature of *Romanitas* displayed by many Romans, such deaths should not be annexed for Stoicism unless well documented as strictly consequent upon it. [...] A Roman's taking his life nobly might testify to his *Romanitas* but did not prove he was a Stoic. (Hartford, 1990, p. 4)¹⁴

In other words: What is Roman, is not necessarily Stoic. This is logically speaking an irrefutable claim, but Hartford's doctrinal approach is also too limiting for it presupposes that Shakespeare was as good a philosopher as Hartford himself. Hartford also referred to Hunter's argument that is more philological.¹⁵ Hunter's critique is partly based on the claim that such influence studies turn 'active' art into 'passive' knowledge. This can certainly be true of some strands of this methodology. It is therefore important to stress that the claim in the present study is not that we can 'know' that Senecan ideas directly influenced the formation of Antonio. For the same reason, this article begins with a reading of the play's central passages related to the world theatre, not with these possible sources. The point is that these textual examples show that it is also possible to see Antonio's world theatre sadness as central to the plot and his self-understanding. The role of the possible Senecan echo in it is to remind us that there are many other possible evaluations of Antonio's sadness than either one of power or of moodiness. In fact, there is quite clear evidence that Shakespeare himself confounded the ideas of *Romanitas* and Stoicism.

At the same time, it must be remembered that something of an English Stoicism cult was developing in Elizabethan London, not least through Justus Lipsius' *De Constantia* (1584) and Montaigne's general popularity (see e.g. Martindales, 1990, 168). It has been eloquently described by Geoffrey Miles:

It is not my purpose to prove that Shakespeare read Seneca's prose. My concern is with Seneca as the ultimate source for the Renaissance of the concept of Stoic constancy. In the 1590s and 1600s, Seneca was at a peak of his popularity and influence, and Shakespeare could scarcely have avoided encountering his doctrines and his memorable sayings on virtue, passion, suffering, and death. Whether he encountered them directly, through reading Seneca's essays in Latin or his tragedies in English translation, or indirectly, from collections of *sententiae*, from Neostoic writers such as Montaigne, or simply from talk with admirers

of Seneca such as Jonson or Chapman, is less important (I would argue) than the ultimate provenance of the ideas. (Miles, 1995, 39)¹⁶

There is nonetheless something to learn from the critics of influence studies. For instance, David Bevington writes without hesitation about 'Brutus' stoicism' even though the term is not used in the play. (Bevington, 2008, 157). More subtle discussions of the role of Stoicism saw the light in the 1990's, not ignoring Hartford and Monsarrat but challenging them. Most important are Geoffrey Miles' *Shakespeare and the Constant Romans* (1996) and C. and M. Martindale's *Shakespeare and the Uses of Antiquity* (1990). Following the former, this would be the state of the art today:

I believe that there is no evidence that Shakespeare had a scholarly knowledge of Greco-Roman philosophy, but that he was aware of, and deeply engaged with, current debates about Stoic 'constancy'. I see his attitude as neither unequivocally hostile nor admiring, but ambivalent. (Miles, 1996, 5)

Following this tempered approach, the same 'constancy' can be applied to understand Antonio's actions and how the play paradoxically can still be a comedy. This is also the chance to tap into a very recent development in Shakespeare studies where new discussions of the theme have shown that Stoicism is not only relevant in relation to the Roman plays but also in the *Second Henriad* (Graham 2014) and in *The Comedy of Errors* (Weinberg 2016).

V. Stoic World Theatre

If Roman inspiration can be present in the second Henriad, it can of course also be present in an 'Italian' play such as *The Merchant of Venice*. The casket scene was probably also taken from the *Gesta Romanorum* which had appeared in translation 1575 and was reprinted 1595.¹⁷ This makes it further tempting to suggest the connection between Antonio's role and Shakespeare's possible sources for the *theatrum mundi*. Not just because Antonio's conduct idealises a constancy of personhood often identified with Stoicism in Shakespeare, but also because one of Seneca's clearest uses of the *theatrum mundi* is related to an affect of sadness. In one of his massively influential epistles, Seneca writes:

The merriment of those whom men call happy is feigned, while their sadness is heavy and festering, and all the heavier because they may not meanwhile display their grief but must act the part of happiness in the midst of sorrows that eat out their very hearts. [...] This drama of human life wherein we are assigned the parts which we are to play so badly. (Seneca, *Epistle LXXX*)¹⁸

The quote connects sadness and the world theatre, which increases the relevance of its possible influence on Antonio. Antonio's sadness is not just 'heavy and festering': The play also replays the structure of Seneca's diagnostics. The first line after Antonio's initial invocation of the world theater in 1.1.77 is Gratiano's 'merriment' if not feigned happiness: 'Let me play the fool./ With mirth and laughter let old wrinkles come,/ And let my liver rather heat with wine/ Than my heart cool with mortifying groans.' (1.1.79-82) Seneca is clearly negotiating a dialectic between the demands of public life and the personal state of mind in relation to the *theatrum mundi*. The same dialectics of happiness and sadness are reenacted in Gratiano's merry reply to Antonio's sadness.

Seneca's writings are permeated by the idea of the world stage, but that could be said to be the case for many of his contemporaries. The point is that very similar patterns from Seneca's use of it is replayed in the drama, coincidence or not. Two of the central passages in Seneca with regards to the *theatrum mundi* have apparently never been considered in relation to Antonio's fate. 'Do everything as if Epicurus were watching you,' he writes in *Epistle XXV*,¹⁹ and by Braden quoted as 'do everything as if someone were watching,' in his immensely influential *Renaissance Tragedy and the Senecan Tradition* (1985, 26). This is a rather grave, ethical version, which would not be foreign to Antonio if the present argument – that he uses his conscious world theatre to do good – is accepted. A more straight-forward similarity is the death scenes. Seneca's death was described by Tacitus:

Seneca, quite unmoved, asked for tablets on which to inscribe his will, and, on the centurion's refusal, turned to his friends, protesting that as he was forbidden to requite them, he bequeathed to them the only, but still the noblest possession yet remaining to him, the pattern of his life, which, if they remembered, they would win a name for moral worth and steadfast friendship. (Tacitus, *Annales*, 15.62)²⁰

The 'noblest possession' of Seneca is 'the patterns of his life,' and the remembrance of this story will ensure steadfast friendship. It is curious that Antonio uses the same idea just before his anticipated death in relation to the concept of the told tale. He wants nothing else than for the friends to speak him 'fair in death' and at the end of that story, he is sure that Portia would see that Bassanio had 'once a love.' The 'steadfast friendship' is also underscored in the play with explicit reference to Roman honour. Antonio's willingness to sacrifice is due to the role that was assigned to him as the 'tainted wether of the flock,/ Meetest for death' (4.1.113-114). The play constructs this knowledge as one that makes him, according to Bassanio:

The dearest friend to me, the kindest man,
The best-conditioned and unwearied spirit
In doing courtesies; and one in whom
The ancient Roman honour more appears
Than any that draws breath in Italy. (3.2.291-295)²¹

Keeping in mind Hartford's wise warnings, this is not conclusive evidence, but it is striking that this relation to the 'ancient Roman honour' has not been taken seriously as a possible Stoicism when Horatio's 'I am more an antique Roman than a Dane' (5.2.343) often has been seen as conclusive. Antonio's 'quietness of spirit' (4.1.12) in the face of death is preconditioned in his understanding of himself as the one given the sad role on the great world stage – and this is what generates his kindness.

It is always a fault when influence studies claim that only truly understood doctrines of e.g. Stoicism can be accepted as influence, and this is where Monsarrat and Hartford are too strict in their criterions. It is more relevant to see how Stoicism was *de facto* transmitted and understood. Therefore, the Stoic concept of 'constancy' – a development out of such Antique notions as *ataraxia* and *homologia* – has long been accepted as part of the Shakespearean vocabular. In Miles' description:

An attitude of patient endurance, absence of passion, indifference to externals. It is this attitude which [...] is summed up in the popular use not only of the words 'stoic' and 'stoical' but also of the word 'philosophical'. Shakespeare's characters, indeed, use 'philosophy' in this way. (Miles, 1996, 12-13)

He then proceeds to mention *Romeo and Juliet* and *Much Ado About Nothing* (not even the Roman plays) and notes as often before that Seneca and Cicero were the main sources, but 'the one stresses consistency, the other steadfastness.' (Ibid., 13) Cicero's idea in *De Officiis* is focused on decorum and therefore very apt to comply with the social roles demanded by society. Seneca, on the other hand:

In his moral epistles and essays such as *De constantia sapientis*, celebrates a more heroic ideal of the constancy of the wise man. For Seneca *constantia* means strength and stability of mind, unmoved by passion, unshaken by disaster. (ibid., 13)

These are of course Miles' own paraphrases, but it is striking that no one has seen how well they fit with Antonio's state of mind and his development. He is surrounded by passion – outbursts of love and hate are all around him –, he is certainly 'unshaken by disaster' and as already described, he is the only Venetian

(perhaps save the Duke) with 'stability of mind' to preserve the virtues of the city in the face of disaster. Geoffrey Miles' book is an attempt to show that Shakespeare's 'Stoicism' is built on a fruitful tension between Senecan and Ciceronian concepts of Stoic constancy. In Antonio's willingness to play his part combined with his 'quietness of spirit,' it seems that this tension reaches its climax in Shakespearean comedy. This point is not made any weaker by the fact that the Senecan *Epistles* are the closest we come to a source from the history of ideas to Shakespeare's Venetian world theatre.

VI. Christian Stoicism?

A second relevant consideration is the intersection between Stoicism and Pauline ideas of the world theatre. Apparently, the connection between Antonio's Pauline idea of 'armed existence' and the world theatre tradition in the play has never been noted. It is very hard to distinguish Christian ideals of behavior from Stoic in Elizabethan England.²² At the same time, it is well known that there was an intense exchange between Stoic and early Christian thought. Recently, Erin Weinberg has shown how fruitful this connection can be in relation to Shakespeare in her study of Stoicism in the *Comedy of Errors*. (Weinberg 2016).²³ As Lynda Christian shows, from the perspective of intellectual history of ideas, the Stoic version of the *theatrum mundi* is recognizable in both St. Paul and in several of the early church fathers:

The Senecan phrase hic humanae vitae mimus – this mime we call life – is picked up by the Fathers to express their scorn for the world and its fleshly temptations. 'The merriment of those whom we call happy is feigned' – the tinsel glitter of the 'hollow crown' – becomes one of the most popular vehicles for irony in Renaissance literature. However, the hidden riches of the ironic potential of this metaphor were not to be discovered by Seneca [...] When Paul declares that God has made the good man a theatron, a spectacle for the angels, the world, and men (I Corinth. IV, 9), he is enunciating a Stoic ideal of life.²⁴

There are some quite blatant claims of causality here. The relevant part is in any case that Christian claims to identify the connection between the Pauline *theatron* and the *theatrum mundi*. Antonio openly makes use of the former. He will come 'armed' (4.1.10) and suffer with the 'quietness of spirit' (4.1.13). This is often referenced to Ephesians 6, 11-12, where Paul encourages to 'put on all the armour of God' in the face of the Devil. In the Pauline text corpus, this is a clear resonance to the world theater in First Corinthians 4: 'For I thinke that God hath set forth vs the Apostles last, as it were approued to death. For wee are made a spectacle vnto the world, and to Angels, and to men.'²⁵ The same structure can be identified in the drama when Antonio twins his idea of being armed at 4.1.260. This speech also invokes the 'tale is told'-concept.

From a source perspective on the world theatre in *The Merchant of Venice*, Antonio therefore stands at the intersection between Senecan sadness and Pauline war metaphor against the devil.²⁶

This fusion of Pauline and Stoic imagery in Antonio's lines reaches its climax in 4.1 – a scene well known to operate extensively within Pauline concepts. This is especially relevant in Portia's famous speech on 'the quality of mercy.' (4.1.180-201) It contains at least two references to Paul's letter to the Romans. Drakakis, for instance, suggests that Paul's distinction between Jews and Christians in Romans 11, 30-32 was a common debate amongst Elizabethan intellectuals and that Portia's use of the concept of salvation ('In the course of justice, none of us/ Should see salvation.' (4.1.195-96)) is akin to Romans 9, 30-32.²⁷ It is therefore not unlikely that Antonio would be liable to significant use of Pauline metaphor as well.²⁸

VII. The Elizabethan reception

When comparing the sources of Shakespeare's metaphor of the world theatre to the logic of the play, it is much more likely that Shakespeare (and his audience) would have evaluated Antonio's sadness as an expression of a productive and positive Stoicism. Antonio's experience of the world as a stage is thus what motivates his constancy, his Stoic approach to his coming punishment. However, scholars still describe the trope as an attribute of nihilism. Jamey E. Graham does the same in her erudite examination of the relation between Stoicism and Early Modern subjectivity in the Burckhardt-Greenblatt-tradition: 'Cicero and Machiavelli *likewise* interpreted the world as a stage, action as performance.' (Graham, 2014, 248, my italics) In binding these traditions together, Graham asserts the modern amoral or nihilistic approach to the world stage in which it allows or at least facilitates the notion that if all the world is a stage, no one can have a substantial personality, but always only 'craft fresh roles' in the never-ending power struggles of human sociality. This leads Graham to an objectively wrong claim: 'In *The Merchant of Venice*, a sad Antonio says that he cares nothing for the world-stage or for his wearisome part.' (Graham, 2014, 264) Both Gratiano and Antonio know that he cares *too much* for the world *because* of the stage as already shown. The only point where Antonio claims that he 'cares not' is at 3.4.36, but that is a clear allusion to the fact that once he has done his duty, the tale is told and there is no reason to 'care' – for he is dead.

It seems that Graham also sensed that a more historicist account of the contemporary reception of Shakespeare's plays would lead to a different evaluation of the mask-play: 'According to Sherwood, Henry's 'evasive use of masques' would have been sympathetically received by Elizabethans accepting each man's duty to perform his vocation, however difficult.' (Graham, 2014, 271)²⁹ The Martindales are on the pursuit of the same idea, even with applause:

It conflicts with so much that our culture teaches us to admire. Stoic philosophers did not, of course, expect all men, or indeed many men, to stand as perfectly formed, unshakeable 'gathered selves' without having to undergo a transforming educational process, but change was not valued for its own sake; stability was always the goal. (Martindales, 1990, 169)

Perhaps even better summed-up by Geoffrey Miles: 'Constancy, [according to the Martindales,] however 'repellent' we post-Romantics may find it, appealed profoundly to the Renaissance minds.' (Miles, 1995, 4). This is what connects the argument from the history of ideas to the historical one of reception: If the 'modern' mind is not exactly prone to Stoicism, it cannot be ignored that Stoicism was popular in Elizabethan London. No matter how 'repellent' 'we' might find it, this is an argument for the fact that the Renaissance mind would not have been as prone to the nihilistic or pessimistic interpretations of sadness in the world theatre. This perspective can also be supported by a linguistic point, relevant to the question of the original reception of the play. Even if the meaning is now obsolete, the Oxford English Dictionary names two alternative meanings of 'sad': "2. Gravity of mind or demeanour; seriousness, soberness, staidness," and "3. Steadfastness, constancy; firmness of faith." This is also evidence of the fact that an Elizabethan audience could have appreciated other meanings of the affective state of mind, described as 'sad' in the play, than a strictly 'modern' interpretation. Especially as the OED mentions 'constancy' as one possible attribute of sadness.³⁰

Such a contextual approach to audience-response history is also supported by the Second Cambridge Edition of the play with reference to more recent discussions of race. Mahood retells the story of the 'Kenyan' (sic!) writer Karen Blixen who told the plot of the play to her local butler, Farah Aden. He was apparently 'deeply disappointed by Shylock's defeat. He was sure the Jew could have succeeded, if only he had used a red-hot knife. As an African listener, he had expected a tale about a clever trickster [...] Shylock let him down. We can be as far off-course as Farah in our reading of the play if we do not pay some heed to the attributes of its first audience' (Mahood, 1987, 8). This is a point entirely correct in relation to issues of emotions and world theatre.

VII. Conclusion

To sum up, there are three good reasons to consider the meaning of the world theatre in the play: Textually, the structure of the drama shows its relevance and profound significance. Generically, the use of the trope shows severe influence from Roman Stoicism. Historically, there is little reason to think that the Elizabethan audience would have received the play's *theatrum mundi* as superficial or irrelevant, nor as pessimistic or negative. This will be in contrast to some modern literary histories, which think that a trope

such as the world as a stage is an exclusively negative one, also in the case of Antonio. Antonio's sadness isn't sad in the modern sense of the word. He uses it to do good and thus ensures that the world theatre of Early Modern Venice is a comedy, not a tragedy. This allows for two more general insights into the role of the *theatrum mundi* in literary history. First, it is not necessarily a tragedy to live in the world theatre. As in the case of Shakespeare's only equal in the use of trope, Pedro Calderón de la Barca, the *theatrum mundi* can be serious business and earnest drama without becoming a tragedy. Second, if we are only prepared to evaluate Shakespearean imagery within modern, 'forward-looking' frameworks, we risk losing sight of some of the profound ways in which the dramas explore human existence. We need not see the plays as 'jokes' just because they are comedies.

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NOTES

¹ All references to Shakespeare-plays follow the newest Arden edition. See bibliography for full references.

² And indeed, it has been. When Frank J. Warnke wrote one of the first overviews of the image of the Baroque *theatrum mundi*, he described Shakespeare's use of it in *The Merchant of Venice* (c. 1596) and *As You Like It* (c. 1599) as its 'normal expression in set-pieces wittily observing the analogy [of life as a stage.]' (Warnke, 1969, 190) Some 20 years earlier, Ernst Robert Curtius had not even mentioned the former when he surveyed what he called the 'theatrical metaphors' in European literary history in his seminal *Europäische Literatur und lateinisches Mittelalter* (1948). In the most important and erudite survey of the history of the world theatre, Lynda G. Christian described Antonio's use of the metaphor in an echo of Warnke: 'Jacques' melancholy is urbane and full of literary allusions; Antonio's melancholy is the moodiness of youth which tends to self-romanticization.' (Christian, 1987, 157).

³ Summarized in note to 1.1 by (Drakakis, 2010, 169).

⁴ As Curtius acutely remarked: 'The Globe Theatre, then, was under the banner of the medieval English humanist.' (Curtius, 1963, 151). Other general surveys of the role of the *theatrum mundi* in Shakespeare can be found in Righter, 1962; Warnke, 1969; Link & Niggle 1981; Balthasar, 1983; Christian, 1987;

⁵ Drakakis' notes 'lacking in sense' in his commentary. (Drakakis, 2010, p. 170.) Mahood leans towards 'absent-minded' (Mahood, 1987, 57) whereas Halio takes it for the substantive of 'idiot, fool.' (Halio, 1993, 103).

⁶ According to Drakakis (Drakakis p 170, n6.) He does not mention these origins but is likely to have the inscription in the temple at Delphi in mind: 'Know thyself.' The Latin 'Nosce teipsum' is mentioned by Mahood (1987, 57) but not referred to the temple.

⁷ Recently claimed by William N. West: 'It is [...] a recurrent feature of Stoic thought that the philosopher is one who recognizes that every person plays a role in life.' (West, 2008, 3)

⁸ One of the few commentators who demonstrates a sense of this irrationality, is Anne Righter, who calls it a 'curious melancholy for which there appears to be no rational cause.' (Righter, 1962, 165)

⁹ A nominalist interpretation of the *theatrum mundi* in the modern period could of course reject this. The world theatre *can* just mean the nihilist mask-play of social relations and power struggles. But as Sofie Kluge has pointed out, the Antique contribution to the topos, especially the legacy of Plato, almost always implies 'the idea of reality as a complex, multi-layered structure, all of whose levels are not immediately accessible to human intelligence.' (Kluge 2010, 209) For an account of the 17th century world theatre, oriented 'forward' in time, as underscored by the title, see Karnick, 1980.

¹⁰ The only commentator who denies the echo seems to be Halio, 1993, 112.

¹¹ It also has a resemblance to the most famous Shakespearean use of the trope. Jaques' 'all the world's a stage' is triggered by the Duke's opinion that the world is a 'wide and universal theatre' which presents 'woeful pageants.' (2.7.137-138). The condition of a small being in an enormous world is thus also tied together with the *theatrum mundi* other places in Shakespeare and even connected to sadness ('woeful pageants'). As the case with *The Merchant of Venice*, *As You Like It's* use of the trope is incidentally also linked to a pointer backwards in historical time. Jaques' statement is followed by an Ovidian conception of the ages of man.

¹² Nonetheless, Drakakis stays with the friends in the Arden edition in the note to 2.8.53: '**Embraced heaviness** embracéd; the sadness that has resulted from his accepting responsibility for Bassanio's enterprise.' (Drakakis, 2010, 272)

¹³ Whether this weakening of the distinction between drama and story is also a weakening of the ontological status of the image of the world as a stage is an open and relevant issue to be addressed, but also a theoretical one which would require more space than allowed for here.

¹⁴ Hartford has also shown how T. S. Eliot was aware of this difference between Stoicism and a more general 'Roman' spirit. See (Hartford, 1990, p. 1-2).

¹⁵ Namely the aforementioned thought that Shakespeare only knew Senecan drama, not the prose. But that is not necessarily correct. Geoffrey Miles has pointed out that there also is a tradition within influence studies to see Seneca's prose as equally, if not more, important. (Miles, 1996, 39.) He also refers to (Palmer, 1953).

¹⁶ The quote includes a reference to Braden, 1985, 2.

¹⁷ For the English translations, see Drakakis, 2011, 32.

¹⁸ Seneca, *Epistles*. Trans. Richard M. Gummere, 2014, II, 217. Also quoted by Christian, 1987, 18. She notes the connection between Cicero and Seneca and their following influence on the development of the trope.

¹⁹ Seneca, *Epistles*, Trans. Gummere, I, 185.

²⁰ Translation from Tacitus, 1942. Also quoted by Braden, 1985, 25, but not related to the play.

²¹ Notice that the 'unweariness' here only refers to his persistent will to do good.

²² Described very well by Martindales, 1990, 171: 'The Stoicism of Lipsius and other Renaissance writers is partly one accommodated to a Christian culture. Lipsius at one point distinguishes contemporary adherents of Stoicism from the original Stoics, and argues that Christian followers of the doctrine, through their belief in God's providence, have an advantage over their predecessors.'

²³ Weinberg uses it in relation to gender studies: 'By drawing on Paul's *Letter to the Ephesians* to envision a uniquely domestic form of Christian Stoicism, Shakespeare was involved in this shift towards applying Stoic principles to the unique trials of women.' (Weinberg, 2016, 3)

²⁴ Christian, *Theatrum Mundi*, p. 19. Christian's own underlining. The 'hollow crown' is likely to be an illusion to demasking of Richard's kingship in *Richard II*.

²⁵ King James Version. Quoted from there to underscore the Greek *theatron*, translated with 'spectacle.' There are limits to this connection which Christian fails to notice. As Curtius remarks, Paul is likely to have the Roman Circus in mind, not the Greek theatre, when the apostles become 'a spectacle.' (Curtius, 1953, 148) The Bishop's Bible from 1568 reads: 'For me thynketh, that God hath set foorth vs, whiche are the last apostles, as it were men appoynted to death. For we are made a gasyng stocke vnto the worlde, and to the angels, and to men.' The Geneva Bible uses the phrase 'gasing stocke' as well, where the KJV uses 'spectacle.' It is possible that the earlier translations which are likely to have been more familiar to Shakespeare used the image of the gazingstock to underscore the typological relation to Nahum 3:6 – but that can only be said of the Geneva Bible.

²⁶ Shylock is, it will be remembered, several times compared to the Devil.

²⁷ Drakakis, 2010, 347, note to line 180; 348, note to line 196.

²⁸ There is equally a recent trend within theological exegesis to see Paul's worldview as essentially Stoic. This development was primarily begun by Troels Engberg-Pedersen's *Paul and The Stoics* (2000).

²⁹ Graham is referring to Sherwood, 2007, 105;120

³⁰ I am grateful to the anonymous peer reviewer for suggesting this very helpful linguistic point.

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AUTHOR DETAILS