

Ben Ross Schneider, Jr
English/Emeritus
Lawrence University
Appleton, WI 54912

ben.r.schneider@Lawrence.edu
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Ch 1 of Shakespeare's Morality: Shakespeare was a Stoic

Long ago when this century had run only half its course and I was writing my doctoral thesis on "Wordsworth's Cambridge Education," I met a book that, now that I think about it, changed my life. It didn't strike me the way the light struck Paul on the road to Damascus; it had a much more gradual effect, more as if it sowed a seed that grew into a tree on whose branches I hung not exactly my philosophy of life, though there is some of that on it, but, bit by bit, my appreciation of the English Literature which I have adored and studied and taught. The book I met was one of Wordsworth's schoolbooks, the *De Officiis* of Marcus Tullius Cicero, a book written in the form of a letter to his son, once known in English as *Tully's Offices*, but now, since an "office" is the place where you pursue your career, better known as *Of Duty*. This book leads directly to Wordsworth's well-known "Ode to Duty," that "stern daughter of the voice of God," and, in that same ode, to the very most important Wordsworthian idea of all, that the same force that keeps human beings on the right track "preserves the stars from wrong." It was Cicero (and I now know, his fellow Stoics) who taught Wordsworth that virtue is Natural and more importantly the reverse, that Nature is virtuous, and thus gave rise to the emotional component of modern environmentalism.

The year I found *Tully's Offices* was also my year as a Research Student at St John's College, Cambridge, during which I underwent a considerable culture shock. Imagine my surprise on reading the *Offices* to find in it a striking blueprint of the undergraduate behavior I witnessed daily around me in the extremely sociable style of life at that supposedly academic institution. Cicero had the same horror of pedantry and bragging that the undergraduates did, and his section on decorum perfectly predicted the famous English reserve that they exemplified. The taboos on bragging and pedantry explained one of the most curious things about them: why they never discussed their studies or allowed themselves to be caught doing them. Cicero very much disapproved of absorption in booklearning at the expense of the social life. Rowing, rigger, local events, and mutual friends were almost all they talked about. It turns out that the correspondences I found between Cicero's *Of Duty* and the folkways of Cambridge undergraduates were no accident. *De Officiis* had been for many centuries the English gentleman's handbook.

In the preface to his 17th-century English translation of *Tully's Offices*, Sir Roger L'Estrange called it "the commonest school book that we have," and went on to observe, "as it is the best of books, so it is applied to the best of purposes, that is to say, to training up of youth in the study and exercise of virtue." Voltaire said of it, "No one will ever write anything more wise." The philosopher Hume preferred its moral teaching to that of any Christian manual of behavior. When exactly did this

book enter the English school curriculum? A better question might be, when was it not there? It was the first classical text ever printed, at the Monastery of Subiaco in Italy in 1465. Erasmus prefaced and annotated an edition of it in 1501. The British Museum Catalogue lists eleven printed editions of it before 1600--eight interlinear translations, one English without Latin, and two in Latin. Eighteen more editions were published before 1700. Sir Thomas Elyot, in his popular Governour (1531), which nowadays we would shelve with books on leadership, lists three essential texts for bringing up young gentlemen: Plato's works, Aristotle's Ethics, and De Officiis. "Those three books," he says, "be almost sufficient to make a perfect and excellent governour." King James I's own version of De Officiis, Basilikon Doron (1603), in which he tells his son Prince Henry his duties as man and ruler, refers him to Cicero fifty-five times, sixteen of them to De Officiis. In The Complete Gentleman (1622), Henry Peacham implies that De Officiis is a standard beginning Latin text (29). T. W. Baldwin, after exhaustive researches into Shakespeare's learning, could be certain that he read only one classic, and that, of course, was De Officiis.

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When you consider that the interpretation of plays consists mainly of judging the behavior of characters, you would suppose that literary scholars would want to immerse themselves in the behavioral medium in which in which the playwright, his audiences, and perforce, his characters, lived, moved and had their being. You would assume, for example, that an unwaivable pre-requisite for study of Shakespeare would be a thorough knowledge of De Officiis. Believe it or not, in twelve years of reading Shakespeare criticism in preparation for writing this book, I have not found a single reference to De Officiis, even though books and articles on Shakespeare are coming out at a rate of 5500 titles a year. This phenomenon is all the more difficult to understand when you consider the wholesale rejection in the last fifteen years of interpretation of literature by textual analysis in favor of interpretation by means of the historical and cultural matrix.

I've been pondering this mystery for several years, and I think I may have found the answer: even academics, much as they set store by originality, have as great a tendency to conform to the dominant style of thought as the less-happy multitude, if not more, because tenure may depend on not rocking the boat. Or are we dealing with a humanistic version of the the blind spot in a "paradigm" so compellingly described in the late Thomas Kuhn's Nature of Scientific Revolutions. Paradigmatic or not, such stolid herdmindedness is still astonishing when one realizes that the primary sources for Elizabethan morality have been staring us in the face ever since a farsighted scholar named Ruth Kelso called them to our attention in 1929 by means of a monumental bibliography of Renaissance books pertaining to the Doctrine of the English Gentleman. In 1956 she published a sequel, The Doctrine for the Lady. These two works comprise almost 1500 titles, about one-third in English, the rest in Latin or Romance languages.

If Professor Kelso had included editions of classical moralists in their own or modern languages, the number of titles

would greatly increase. In her second book she summarizes her findings in a sentence that carries an important message for us: "the bulk of all that these treatises contain is made up of commonplaces, culled mostly from the ancients, whose names besprinkle the pages of all writers. . . . There is plenty of evidence that these same commonplaces were not of mere academic interest, for the letters, speeches, and fiction of the time are full of the same ideas and rules for conduct." On inspection, one discovers that what these commonplaces add up to is Stoicism, or neo-Stoicism if you prefer, though there was never anything "neo" about it, because it flows unrestrained from ancient Rome all the way to 19th-century Europe. According to Professor Kelso the moral commonplaces sprinkled so liberally all over Renaissance life, letters, and thought came from only four principal sources: Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, and Seneca. The works of these authors comprise an awful lot of reading, but you would get a good start on Elizabethan morality with *The Republic*, the *Nichomachean Ethics*, *De Officiis*, and Seneca's *Essays and Epistles*, which appear to be the most important titles by these authors. According to Paul Oskar Kristeller, in his last of many books on Renaissance thought (*Renaissance Thought and Its Sources*, 1979), the famous "humanists" who populated Renaissance universities made their livings by teaching grammar, rhetoric, poetry, history, and moral philosophy to undergraduates. Since both rhetoric and history had strong moral emphasis, it may be said that the universities were to a great extent schools of Stoic virtue. At Oxford and Cambridge even today, undergraduates still "read" moral philosophy for the B.A. degree. Despite this fact literary scholars have steadfastly turned their faces away from moral thought in the Renaissance. There, but for my serendipitous encounter with Cicero so long ago, I, too, would have gone.

Perhaps my colleagues have ignored Renaissance morality because they have been following a false scent. Although a great many classical writers were re-discovered and re-born during the Renaissance, there was no re-naissance of moral philosophers, because they never died. They simply weren't what happened, and therefore they do not figure in our history of the period. So, for example, Kerrigan and Braden's recent *Idea of the Renaissance* (1989) abandons the period's enormous investment in morality in order to pursue a vision of personal, political, and philosophical development leading to democratic individualism and Kantian idealism. The idea of the Renaissance does not include morality. Similarly, in a chapter of his book on the Senecan tradition in European drama actually entitled "Stoicism in the Renaissance," Braden omits any mention of Stoicism's domination of school and college education and the self-improvement market. Since Stoicism actually opposes individualism in important ways and prefers social harmony to personal achievement, our ignorance of its tenets does great damage to our view of the Renaissance.

Another reason for Stoicism's disappearance from the screen of history might be the fall from grace of its practitioners. The Puritan/democratic/free trade party in early modern England knew exactly who its enemies were: "Freeholders and Tradesmen," said the great non-conformist preacher Richard Baxter, "are the strength of Religion and Civility in the Land, and Gentlemen and Beggars and Servile Tenants are the strength of Iniquity." In the 1934 edition of *The Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences*

under the heading "Gentleman, theory of," we find the gentleman defined not as a paragon of Stoic virtue (as he might have defined himself) but as a product of "high breeding, old money, military pursuits, licentious living, artificial manners, and not working." His ethics were nothing more than a "technique of prestige." Perhaps there is truth in both characterizations, but the point is that the early Puritan, with his passion for equality and economic freedom, developed a fanatic hatred of his upperclass opposition, and the ultimate success of the Puritan ideology has resulted in the assassination of the character of the gentleman, sweeping its Stoic moral infrastructure into oblivion. Thus the vast ocean of moral discourse on which Shakespeare's plays float has been leached out of our view of the past by the triumph of the individual, the Whig view of history, and the idea of progress.

My colleagues may also be victims of a mis-definition of Stoicism leading to the mistaken notion that Shakespeare rejected the whole system. If Stoicism is defined simply as a stony lack of feeling, as is customary in academic circles, then Shakespeare is obviously not a Stoic. But the virtues on which the Stoics base their ethical system go much farther than resistance to passion: they include constancy, integrity, responsibility, honesty, gratitude, and courage; and Stoics have much to say about honor, fortune, leadership, love, duty, and death. When Alexander Pope laid down that "the proper study of mankind is man," he echoed the Stoic purview. They cannot be reduced to their position on passion, which for understanding Shakespeare is the least important part. Recently an academic expert on Eastern mysticism, in the course of an interview by Bill Moyers on PBS in 1996, reporting on an arduous training period under a Zen Master in Japan, recalled that when it came time to graduate and go back to the real world, the Master told his pupils (including the expert) that they still knew nothing about Zen. Zen, he told them, means infinite gratitude to the past, infinite service to the present, and infinite responsibility to the future. Think, for a minute, about why these three obligations are infinite, and you will have a good definition, not just of a Zen practitioner but of the Stoic as I have come to know him/her. That it comes from a Zen master is no surprise to me, because some version of Stoicism, I find, lies at the bottom of the pre- or nonindustrial societies, from which Zen masters survive.

Finally, with the rise to power of the baby-boomers, talk of morality is simply bad taste. Many countercultural opinions have arisen with them, and they have given us a whole new vocabulary for dealing with morality, mostly aimed at the parental side of the generation gap. It was parents who practiced "Victorian morality," got "uptight" when it was violated, were much too "judgmental," and had all kinds of "hangups" about any non-traditional dress or behavior.

It is apparent that wherever "the policeman around the corner" that Conrad thought so necessary to what we call "civilization" (*Heart of Darkness*) is absent or ineffective, self-policing social groups based on virtues enforced by shame come into play. Virtues necessarily dwell among the hunters and gatherers who live in tribes, clans, and extended families and are so assiduously studied by anthropologists. They flourish even in our highly advanced U.S.A., in enclaves where the police

are ineffective, for example among the Bloods and the Crips and other street gangs of Los Angeles. They flourish among our ethnic minorities. As a MacNiell-Lehrer essayist recently pointed out, it is mainly the advocates of family values in California who want to keep the Mexicans out. But it is the Mexicans, above all others, who actually practice family values in California. In fact it is one of the those egregious differences that make them so unpopular with the rest of the state.

As we go back in history, of course, the legal system and the enforcing "policemen around the corner" become weaker and weaker, and the virtues stronger. Where on the policeman/shame scale does Shakespeare's society lie? Karl Marx, surprisingly, was as far as I know, the first modern scholar to give an answer to this question, and it appears very prominently in The Communist Manifesto:

The Bourgeoisie, wherever it has got the upper hand, has put an end to all feudal, patriarchal, idyllic relations. It has pitilessly torn asunder the motley feudal ties that bound man to his 'natural superiors,' and left remaining no other nexus between man and man than naked self-interest, than callous cash payment. It has drowned the most heavenly ecstasies of religious fervor, of chivalrous enthusiasm, of philistine sentimentalism, in the icy water of egotistical calculation. It has resolved personal worth into exchange value; and, in place of the numberless indefeasible chartered freedoms, it has set up that single unconscionable freedom--Free Trade.

In his fact-filled study of preindustrial English society, called *The World We Have Lost* (1965), Peter Laslett quotes this passage as the "words [of] the most penetrating of all observers of the world we have lost." The moral basis of Shakespeare's plays is right here, clear as anything, but even a literary establishment heavily tinged with Marxism cannot seem to find it: the policeman is the invention of capitalism. He is the one who enforces the cash nexus. And the "cash nexus" is indeed a

radical change in human relations compared to the links understood by the term "feudal ties." For if I give you an orange and you give me fifty cents, we're quits. You're nothing to me, I'm nothing to you. But if I give you an orange because I like you, you will like me too in gratitude, and some day you may give me something to show it. Maybe you won't. Such a society is based on trust, faith in the operation of gratitude. Shakespeare, Marx believed, lived at the great divide in the quality of human relations that he described so movingly in this "cash nexus" passage of the Manifesto. According to Marx, Shakespeare could see both ways, and what he saw coming was a great big black cloud of increasing misery of the working class named Shylock. This is the opinion of John Gross in his most sensitive and informative book on the reputation of Shylock (1992).

You would think that the rush in the last two decades to Marxist literary analysis ("new historicism," "cultural materialism," "postmodernism," "postcolonialism," "cultural poetics," "deconstruction"--whatever you call it, the results are

pretty much the same) would have produced an awareness among Shakespeareans that the subject of their study lived in a society bound together by mutual trust, especially in the light of their shrill claim to "historicity." But this "advance" in "critical theory" has not brought us any closer to understanding Shakespeare. In fact it has taken us a great deal farther away.

It is not as if Marx were a voice crying in the wilderness, for with insights like the one from the Manifesto I have just quoted he founded the disciplines of social science and social history, both of which harp away on the cash nexus incessantly. First and foremost is Max Weber, whose famous book, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, lays the groundwork not only for social but religious history: "The ancient economic ethic of neighborliness," he says in his *Essays in Sociology*, was fostered "by the guild, or the partners in seafaring, hunting and warring expeditions." These communities actually had two moralities, one for the "ingroup" and one for the "outgroup:"

for in-group morality, simple reciprocity : 'As you do unto me I shall do unto you. . . . The following [consequences] have resulted for economic life: for in-group morality the principled obligation to give brotherly support in distress has existed. The wealthy and the noble were obliged to loan, free of charge, goods for the use of the propertyless, to give credit free of interest, and to extend liberal hospitality and support. Men were obliged to render services upon request of their neighbors, and likewise, on the lord's estate, without compensation other than mere sustenance. All this followed the principle: your want of today may be mine tomorrow. This principle was not, of course, rationally weighed, but it played its part in sentiment. Accordingly, higgling in exchange and loan situations, as well as permanent enslavement resulting, for instance, from debts, were confined to outgroup morality and applied only to outsiders.

For Jurgen Habermas, whose social thought takes in the student left, Marx's "egotistical calculation," stripped of its emotive ramifications, becomes the "purposive-rational" behavior of modern western man, in which right action is whatever makes sense given the goal, as opposed to "symbolic interaction," in which right action is that which coincides with mutually-understood social norms, in default of any ultimate goal. (Toward a Rational Society: Student Protest, Science, and Politics [1970]) Today a "rational choice model" governs the research of most political scientists, though it is now strenuously challenged. For instance, a book by Sven Steinmo, Kathleen Thelen, and Frank Longstreth, called *Structuring Politics: Historical Institutionalism in Comparative Analysis*, devotes chapter one to this issue. In our society I suppose that campaigns like those for women's rights and the preservation of endangered species exemplify activities that are rationally-purposive, whereas formalities like Mother's Day, thank you notes, and the marriage ceremony exemplify modes of symbolic interaction, having no end but themselves. For Shakespeare's society, certainly, a "symbolic interaction model," void of rational purposes and goals, but obeying "social norms," produces a better fit.

Karl Polanyi, in *The Great Transformation* holds that although "purposive-rational" ethics go hand-in-hand with industrialization, no truly purposive-rational society has ever existed, unless for a short time in the "satanic mills" of Dickens's England, when some amount of starvation was rationalized as necessary to labor's becoming a commodity in fact. Before and since, though they have tolerated a high degree of rationality in human relations, "free market" societies have simply refused to tolerate starvation. In 1944 Polanyi wrote

The outstanding discovery of recent historical and anthropological research is that man's economy, as a rule, is submerged in his social relationships. He does not act so as to safeguard his individual interest in the possession of material goods; he acts so as to safeguard his social standing, his social claims, his social assets. He values material goods only in so far as they serve this end.

Or, as Shakespeare put the case, out of the mouth of Iago into the ear of Othello:

Who steals my purse steals trash; 'tis something, nothing;
'Twas mine, 'tis his, and has been slave to thousands;
But he that filches from me my good name
Robs me of that which not enriches him,
And makes me poor indeed. (3.3.155-161)

In other words only one's goodwill value - the amount of trust he can inspire - is worth anything.

English social historians also bear witness. In *The World We Have Lost* (1965) Peter Laslett brings forward conclusive evidence to show that it was a world knit together by family ties. Keith Wrightson, in *English Society, 1580-1680*, well documents the country custom of lending money without interest as a favor to friends and neighbors, though in the early 17th century usurers began more and more to perform the office. The practice of reciprocating favors held forth both horizontally between fellow tenants and vertically between landlord and tenant.

The philosopher Alastair MacIntyre, in a thoroughgoing history of the virtues, called *After Virtue* (1981) has a slightly different explanation of why the virtues have lost force in our society. Without a classical narrative (*Iliad*, *Saga*, *Edda*) of a desirable life, he shows, a culture cannot develop a list of the virtues that enable a person to live that life. With the coming of democracy and the concomitant submerging of the heroic into the ordinary, philosophical attempts to define "good" in universal terms (as those of Locke, Hume, Kant, and the Utilitarians) dissolved the concept of virtues in the fuzzy idea of virtue, and unsolvable arguments to establish totally contradictory rights or goods have plagued us ever since: (I have a right to my hard-earned property vs. the haves should be taxed to improve the lot of the have nots). MacIntyre concludes that unlike the ancients from whom we inherit the names but not the content of the virtues, we have no common goal, no common narrative of the good life, no ethical consensus, no virtues.

For Marshall McLuhan, the great divide of which we are

speaking is caused by Gutenberg, who shifted our way of communicating from speech to print and our way of knowing from ear to eye, causing a slow but cataclysmic revolution in our perception of reality, inexorably atomizing the world into replaceable parts like pieces of printers' type, substituting the abstract for the concrete, reason for feeling, the parts for the whole, specialists for role-players, individuals for members, the nation state for the tribe, democracy for patriarchy, equality for fellowship. In an analysis of King Lear, he finds that the king, by splitting up his kingdom in hopes of ruling more efficiently, is the new rationalist executive, and Cordelia, totally dismayed by this way of proceeding, can only play her role as daughter. But whether the medium of change is religious, economic, moral, or itself, the social historians agree that ethics in the modern industrial state differ radically from those of pre-industrial society.

The "norms" of which these social scientists speak are of course a prominent feature of those "primitive" societies that captivate the anthropologists: for example, Marcel Mauss in his classic *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies* (introduced by E. E. Evans-Pritchard [1954]), in which the important part played by reciprocal gift-giving in pre-agricultural culture is documented; and Marshall Sahlins in *Stone Age Economics*, an amazing account of the care free life that actual hunters and gatherers achieve by sharing everything that comes to hand. In *The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property*, Lewis Hyde has explored the function of these same each-for-all economics in the production of art. The Romans apparently remembered or observed or retained vestiges of this pre-agricultural age, and admired it, as Seneca testifies in quoting Virgil's *Georgics*:

No ploughman tilled the soil, nor was it right
To portion off or bound one's property.
Men shared their gains, and earth more freely gave
Her riches to her sons who sought them not.

What race of men [comments Seneca] was ever more blest than that race? They enjoyed all nature in partnership. Nature sufficed for them . . . and this her gift consisted of the assured possession by each man of the common sources.

At least by the time of Domitian (Seneca lived in the time of Nero), Romans did know about hunters and gatherers. In his *Germania*, sounding just like Marshall Sahlins, Tacitus marvels at the "disgustingly" poor Fennians (Finns?) that live on the far northern boundary of the German world:

They have no proper weapons, no horses, no homes. They eat wild herbs, dress in skins, and sleep on the ground. . . . Yet they count their lot happier than that of others who groan over field labour, sweat over house-building, or hazard their own or other men's fortunes in hope of profit and the fear of loss. Unafraid of anything that man or god can do to them, they have reached a state that few can attain: for these men are so well content that they do not even need to pray for anything. (Penguin 141)

Fennians, Polynesians, baboons, and ants practice resource-

sharing. Why is it so hard for us to learn?

A great divide in quality of life also separates us from Shakespeare. Fernand Braudel, the first historian to accumulate evidence on life at the bottom of the social pyramid rather than chronicling events at the top, the one who first brought material conditions to our attention when he founded in France the famous Annales school of historiography, begins his grand four-volume opus, *Civilization and Capitalism, 15th-18th Century: The Structures of Everyday Life*, with the proposition that civilizations are propelled by population. "The outward feature that immediately differentiates [mankind in] the present from mankind before 1800 is the recent increase in the number of people." Until about 1700 the birth and death rates were about equal; then births began to outnumber deaths and the population took off. In our century population doubles every thirty or forty years. Plagues (four in London between 1593 and 1664); epidemics (e.g., influenza, smallpox, syphilis, typhus, and typhoid) and famine (e.g., thirteen full scale in France during the 16th century) were the principal dampers on population growth. And there were, of course, wars: throughout her reign Elizabeth waged war, in the Low Countries, France, Scotland, and Ireland, spending more than 3 million pounds. In *The World We Have Lost*, Peter Laslett, using figures from 1690, estimates that at birth an English baby had an average life expectancy of thirty years. An extremely high infant mortality rate was the main cause for this low figure. If the baby lived until it was twenty, it could expect to live until fifty.

Lear's friend Kent, the "old fellow" with a "grey beard" who, on being remanded to the stocks for quarreling, declares himself "too old to learn" and who in the end declines the crown in order to go away and die--this Kent, by his own testimony, had "years on [his] back forty-eight" (1.4.39; 2.2.63, 85, 127; 5.3.322-323). "Old" Falstaff (*passim*) admits to "some fifty years, inclining to three-score." (2.4.424-5) At forty-seven, the 16th-century essayist Montaigne, writes as if he has not long to live. But so many lethal diseases and dangers have been removed from our lives that not until we reach our eighties do we submit to being "old." Until our seventies, when our friends begin to die off in alarming numbers, we manage to postpone the contemplation of our own deaths. When Hobbes wrote (in *Leviathan* 1651), "The life of man is nasty, brutish, and short," he meant more than we can imagine. Death would have seemed omnipresent and imminent in those days, because, added to the fact that all lives were compressed, was the fact that there were so many more ways to die. Nowadays, when someone dies before the statistically expected time, we think it cruel and unusual punishment and look for some entity to blame and/or sue. In fact a few years ago Roger Rosenblatt wrote a review to this effect, entitled "An Inescapable Need to Blame," on the front page of the New York Times book section. It seems to us Americans that if no one made a mistake (doctor, mechanic, pilot, politician), we all would live forever: death used to be the rule, but now (you would think) it is the exception.

When you read his essays, Montaigne gives the impression that he spent his whole life dying. At age thirty-nine he wrote his famous piece on Cicero's pronouncement, "To philosophize is to learn to die."

In the following passage from that essay he discusses death's omnipresence:

If thou but register [people of renown], I will lay a wager, I will find more that have died before they came to five and thirty years, than after. [Consider] Jesus Christ, who ended his humane life at three and thirty years. The greatest man that ever was being no more than a man, I mean Alexander the Great . . . also [died at] that age. [Henry V died at 35] How many several means and ways hath death to surprise us! . . . I omit to speak of agues and pleurisies; who would ever have imagined that a Duke of Brittany should have been stifled to death in a throng of people, as whilome was a neighbour of mine at Lyons. . . . Hast thou not seen one of our late Kings slain in the midst of his sports? and one of his ancestors die miserably by the chocke??? of an hog? Eschilus . . . when he stood most upon his guard, stricken dead by the fall of a tortoise shell, which fell out of the talons of a eagle flying in the air? and another choked with the kernel of a grape? And an Emperor die by the scratch of a combe, whilst he was combing his head? And Aemylius Lepidus with hitting his foot against a door-sill? Add Aufidius with stumbling against the Consull-chamber door as he was going in thereat? And Cornelius Gallus, the Praetor, Tigillinus, Captain of the Roman watch, Lodowike, son of Guido Gonzaga, Marquis of Mantua, end their days between women's thighs? And of a far worse example Speusippus, the Platonian philosopher, and one of our Popes? Poor Bebius a judge, whilst he demurreth the suit of a plaintiff but for eight days, behold his last expired: And Caius Iulius a Physician, whilst he was anointing the eyes of one of his patients, to have his own sight closed for ever by death. And if amongst these examples, I may add one of a brother of mine [who died at age twenty from being hit in the head by a tennis ball]. These so frequent and ordinary examples, happening, and being still before our eyes, how is it possible for man to forgo or forget the remembrance of death? [Is she not] ready at hand to take us by the throat.

In Shakespeare's plays, she is indeed ready at hand. As Hamlet says, "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" (4.2.220-222). Shakespeare, we can't help noticing, broods all the time on "that undiscovered country from whose bourne no traveler returns"; his most memorable lines meditate on death: "To be or not to be," "Alas poor Yorick," "Life's but a walking shadow," "We are such stuff as dreams are made on." Perhaps more than in any other play of Shakespeare's, death is ubiquitous in King Lear, about which the eminent Shakespearean Maynard Mack records a salient comment by one of his graduate students, Evelyln G. Hooven:

The dramatic emphasis is on the generality of death
The reiterated fact of the multiple deaths is processional

in quality. It is like an enormous summarial obituary. The Fool disappears of causes mysterious; Oswald . . . is killed by Edgar; Goneril and Regan are poisoned and dagger-slain;

Gloucester dies offstage of weariness, conflicting emotion, and a broken heart; Kent is about to die of grief and service; Edmund is killed by his brother in a duel; Cordelia dies (by a kind of mistake . . .) at a hangman's hands; and King Lear dies of grief and deluded joy and fierce exhaustion. . . . Death is neither punishment nor reward: it is simply in the nature of things.

A profound moral difference proceeds from such a difference in material circumstances: in modern America, with death at a distance, our ethical endeavors center on the quality, preservation, and enhancement of our lives. In early modern Europe, expecting death any moment, people thought of what would persist after death, what would be remembered of them. When the goddess gave Achilles the choice between a long and obscure life or a short and heroic one, he chose the latter, and why not? As Hal said to Falstaff, "Thou owest God a death." Why not make it count? We see ourselves in the here and now; Elizabethans saw themselves in history. We are obsessed with current trends, careers, health, safety, the environment; they were obsessed with how a future Plutarch would record them, if they were so lucky as to have one. Modeling themselves on heroes in song and story, they strive to do memorable deeds, preferably good. In such a state of affairs being good is better than being rich.

And so we seek the good life and they sought the good death. Notice, as T. S. Eliot already has (in "Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca"), how many of Shakespeare's tragic heroes find it necessary to make an appeal to posterity before they expire. (Eliot missed Antonio in the Merchant of Venice.) In his two great speeches urging his troops "unto the breach" at Harfleur and into the battle of Agincourt, Henry promises his soldiers that they will go down in history. Posterity was the audience to which he and his soldiers played. Seneca, the leading Roman and, I argue, the leading Renaissance moral philosopher, reckons with death on almost every page, and postulates a life dominated by posterity's opinion. In his Stoic view of things, the only possession that cannot be taken away from us, whatever else we lose, is our virtue. Everything else is subject to chance or fortune. So it is that Marc Antony can say (according to Seneca) after losing the whole world at the battle of Actium. "All I have is what I have given away." When Othello's friend Cassio cries out, "O, I have lost my reputation! I have lost the immortal part of myself, and what remains is bestial," he expresses the deepest anxiety of a death-dominated society.

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In addition to the omnipresence of death we must consider the prevalence of plain ordinary bad luck, the part played by the sheer physical, economic, political, social, hygienic instability--of entropy. Modern democratic states, in which we wake up every day to the same country, the same house on the same street in the same town, the same job, the same hot water temperature, the same electric voltage, are almost as dependable as the dawn itself. We have eternally vigilant Ralph Naders, watch dogs, whistle blowers, risk managers, safety nets, damage controllers, and crash investigators. We have efficient police, state-of-the-art armies, checks and balances, and our airlines

are trying to run on time. Consider especially the stability that comes with the cash nexus. When I sell an orange I immediately pocket fifty cents. If I give it away, the recipient may someday return the favor: maybe he will help my child get a scholarship or maybe he will forget my gift altogether. The friendship generated by the gift of an orange may be worth more in the long run than 50 cents, but there is no predicting how it will operate. I imagine that life in the Renaissance was in a continual state of flux; like life in the mythic banana republic, it was full of surprises. The success of any venture or career would have been a matter of luck, not a certain outcome of merit, hard work, and the right degree from the right university.

A whole vocabulary of words seldom-used now was necessary for dealing with the radical instability of those times. In Seneca's first book of Epistles words like fortune (71 times), chance (14 times), fate (9 times), or destiny (once) occur once in every 741 words; in the first volume of Montaigne's Essays, one or another of these words occurs once in 576 words, and, in *The Merchant of Venice*, once in 613. In *As You Like It*, for comparison, the frequency is once in 940, while in a recent book of academic essays (*The New Historicism*, edited by Aram Veesser), only once in 3,536 words. These spotty figures do not prove anything, but they do suggest that "fortune" has a higher density in *The Merchant* (for reasons I will suggest) than is usual for Shakespeare and that fortune used to be much more on people's minds than it is now.

The moral effect of radical entropy is a strong belief in "fortune." Shakespeare and his contemporaries used "good Fortune" where we would use the word "success," having a definite perception that chance rules the affairs of men. Hamlet wonders "whether to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, or to take arms against a sea of trouble, and by opposing, end them." Even when he does decide to take arms, fortune calls the shots, as it does in the play's catastrophe. While you are warding off an arrow, a sling hits you. Just as you are not to blame when fortune turns against you, so you can take no credit when she smiles. And that's why "success" doesn't mean "achievement of desired goal" but merely "outcome," in Shakespeare's vocabulary. If a goal is achieved, it's just a matter of luck. To take credit for such an outcome would be dishonest and vain.

The moral consequence of this instability of human affairs is to rank certain intangible goods over material ones. For instance, we would cherish our friends and family more than our expensive toys. Marriage would be more of a partnership against fortune than a buffer against loneliness. We would put a higher premium on returning favors, acknowledging obligations, showing gratitude, and performing thanks than in increasing our insurance coverage.

Shakespeare's virtues came to him in many ways: they were drunk in with his mother's milk (if with the Stoics, Wordsworth and Polanyi we assume that that virtues are natural), drummed into him at school, conditioned by his experience in a society molded by a prehistory as hunters and gatherers, by Christianity, by chivalry, by Roman occupation and Roman books, and above all by missing out on the cash nexus. Although anthropology and

social history may predict the moral values of Shakespeare's society, Stoic literature will give us a better fix, for, not only was Stoic literature deeply imbedded in English life but Stoicism conveniently invents, systematizes, defines, and exemplifies the terms by which it may be best discussed.

I often wonder whether Stoicism isn't the human animal's instinctive, built-in habit of behavior towards others of the species, and whether the cash nexus and the pursuit of individual self interest via rational choice isn't just another totalizing and unworkable theory like communism. It's not that the free market doesn't serve the consumer well when held in check by rules and regulations, but that its buying and selling approach has no place in our relations with our neighbors. In that realm perhaps altruism is the ultimate selfishness. There are clear signs that as we reach the apogee of the damage done to society by the cash nexus, the old Stoic virtues have all this while been patiently sitting on the bench waiting for a chance to play again.

In the Spring of 96 preparing for the coming presidential election, Jim Lehrer of PBS news held an hour-long forum on the characteristics that the public admired most most desired in presidents from Hoover to Bush. They mentioned courage (many times), affability (often by name and many times by inference), generosity, constancy (once by name, many times by inference, overlooking instances of marital infidelity), honesty, modesty, eloquence, and pragmatism (for the good of the country, not the politician). These are all Stoic virtues. But despite Jim Lehrer's efforts, apparently character wasn't a high priority in the election that ensued.

After Bill Clinton, not strictly demonstrating any of these virtues except affability, got elected to his final term and began worrying about how he would go down in history, it was reported that he was reading the Meditations of Marcus Aurelius, the great Stoic emperor of Rome. On learning of this strange development, Maureen Dowd of the New York Times took the trouble to look up twelve sayings by Aurelius, so that her readers might compare his moral injunctions to what they knew of behavior of the president's demonstrated behaviour. To show the uses of Stoicism, I list the twelve classic Stoic utterances that she cited. But since Aurelius is epigrammatic and cryptic (a common Stoic trait) I have taken the liberty of stating in brackets the principle which each states or implies.

1. Work toward mastery of self and vacillation in nothing. [constancy].

2. Within 10 days you will appear a god even to those to whom today you seem a beast or a baboon if you return to your principles. [Only by rising above sensuality and passion can you attain freedom]

3. Don't any more discuss what the good man is like, but be good. [Talk is cheap; just do it]

4. If it is not right, don't do it; if it is not true, don't say it. [Simplicity. "Righteousness shines with a

light of its own." - De Officiis]

5. Let no one any longer hear you finding fault with your life in a palace. [Ruling is a job, not a perk.]

6. Turn inward to your self, whenever you blame the traitor or the ungrateful, for the fault is plainly yours. [Never forget you are a member of the human race, too, and capable of the worst in us as well as the best]

7. Disdain the flesh: blood and bones, twisted skein of nerves, veins, arteries. [Take charge of yourself]

8. Perceive at last that you have within yourself something stronger and more divine than the passions - fright, suspicion, appetite? - which make a downright puppet of you. [see 2]

9. The simple and good man ought to be entirely such [integrity]. The affectation of simplicity is like a razor. [It divides him?]

10. Nothing is more wretched than the man who seeks to sound the minds of his neighbors. . . . [see 4]

11. Perfection of character possesses this: Not to act a part. [integrity]

12. The man in a flutter for afterlife fails to picture to himself that each of those who remember him will also very shortly, die. Near at hand is your forgetting all; near too, all forgetting you. [see 4 and 6]

To judge from the copious literature on leadership during the last decade, the White House may have picked up Stoic self-denial from the business community, which you would expect to be the last place in the world where you could find it. Open the book *Leaders Digest*, a collection of summaries of the best 150 recent books on business management by Edwin Dieter, to almost any page, and you will find Stoic principles. The word "manager" is now taboo, its place taken by the word "leader," defined as a person utterly devoted to his followers. Paramount in the establishment of successful corporation is the generation of trust, which a leader does by demonstrating integrity, keeping promises, and expressing gratitude for contributions rendered. And these books provide example after example of companies that have become happy families and risen to the top by these means. Strangely, I find no acknowledgement of Stoic sources either by Dieter or by any of the authors in his astonishing book. One author, Stephen Covey, whom *Time* (June '96) selected as one of its twenty-five most influential Americans, comes so close to paraphrasing bits of Stoic prose that one could almost suspect him of plagiarism, but that might be an effect of his epigrammatic and highly charged style. If these gurus found their ideas in their hearts, we are forced to conclude that they are utterly innocent of classical learning, and that Stoic behavior is indeed an instinct of the human race that needs only a little encouragement (or the threat of Japanese competition) to make itself manifest. Of course the names of all the Stoic virtues are still with us and these need only to be reimplemented in terms that we can understand in USA today. "Integrity" is the

same as being "up front," "constancy" is like "following through," and "gratitude" is instrumental in establishing a "win win situation."

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Here follows an annotated list of the most important books on leadership in Shakespeare's time, in rough order of importance: Cicero's *De Officiis*: The European gentleman's handbook. Discussed at the beginning of this chapter.

Seneca's *Moral Essays and Moral Epistles*: The exceedingly learned T. S. Eliot tells us that "In the Renaissance no Latin author was more highly esteemed than Seneca." This author was actually one of four main sources of Renaissance morality, according to Ruth Kelso, author a copious bibliography of 16th-century conduct books, the others being Plato, Aristotle, and Cicero. Since only learned men commonly read Greek, that leaves Cicero and Seneca in command of the greater part of the reading public. Montaigne confesses that his oeuvre is utterly dependent on Seneca and Plutarch. Erasmus, Justus Lipsius, and J. F. Gronovius published "famous editions" of Seneca's *Essays* in the 16th and 17th centuries. In 1578 Arthur Golding translated the *De Beneficiis*, which had become the Renaissance authority on creating social capital. Something called *Seneca's Morals*, probably a compendium of excerpts, was published in English in 1607. In 1614 Thomas Lodge finished translating the complete moral works. Then, in 1678, Sir Roger L'Estrange published *Seneca's Morals by Way of Abstract*. By 1793 this digest had gone into seventeen editions. I found a copy of it (Cleveland 1856) in my mother-in-law's Illinois farmhouse.

Epictetus's *Encheiridion*: The primer of Stoicism. States the basic principle that you can control nothing else in the world but your will and your body. All else is subject to fortune.

Plato's *Republic*: Someone has said that "all philosophy is no more than a footnote to Plato;" it's certainly true of the works in this list. Although no English translation was available during Shakespeare's time, learned men drew heavily on it (as did King James I in his advice to his son, called *Basilikon Doron*).

Plutarch's *Lives*: Translated into English from Amiot's French translation by Sir Thomas North in 1579. The fact that Shakespeare used Plutarch's biographies of Caesar, Antony, and Coriolanus as plots for plays only begins to convey the impact of the work on early modern Europe. During this period history in general, and especially Plutarch's *Lives*, was packaged as a series of moral exempla. In his preface, for example, North emphasizes the moral rewards of reading Plutarch. As I have noted, Montaigne gives nearly full credit for whatever value there is in his *Essays* to Seneca and Plutarch. He cites Plutarch over and over again.

Montaigne's *Essays*: Translated into English by John Florio in 1603. Shakespeare paraphrased Montaigne at some length in

The Tempest (1611) and there are strong reverberations of it in King Lear (1605). Reading Montaigne shows us how powerfully Stoicism affected the European mind. Plutarch provided a fascinating panorama of world history, with appropriate morals throughout. Montaigne provided an encyclopedia of philosophy, morality, and social sciences in an endless random series of familiar essays. It would have provided a quick way for Shakespeare to get into the intellectual main stream of his time. Florio was the tutor of Shakespeare's patron, the Earl of Southampton.

Elyot's Governour (1531): An outline and description of subjects necessary to be taught to gentle offspring, it testifies to the importance of Stoic morality in Shakespeare's England. It was published in 1531 and went into nine editions before 1600, almost as many as De Officiis. Shakespeare took the story of the justice who sent Prince Hal to jail (Henry IV, Part 2) from this book.

King James I's Basilikon Doron (1603): The king's own imitation of De Officiis, also written as a letter to his son. It, too, confirms the omnipresence of Stoic morality in Shakespeare's England.

Joseph Hall's Characters of the Virtues and Vices (1608): Here an English Bishop maintains in his preface that the "divines of the old heathens were their moral philosophers. These received the acts of an inbred law in the Sinai of nature; and delivered them, with many expositions, to the multitude. These were the overseers of manners, correctors of vices, directors of lives, doctors of virtue." Hall's characterizations, as one might expect after this preliminary, partake mightily of these "old heathens." The eminent 16th-century scholar Justus Lipsius devoted much of his life to proving that Stoicism harmonized with

Christianity. In 1992 Jesus Lopez-Pelaez Casellas, at the Third International Congress for English Renaissance Studies held in Granada, Spain, read a paper arguing that Shakespeare's concept of honor was more Stoic/Ciceronian than Augustinian. It was a period in which the boundaries between Stoicism and Christianity became blurred, and Shakespeare is a prime case in point.

Castiglione's Courtier: Translated from the Italian into English by Thomas Hoby in 1561 and into Latin by Bartholomew Clerke in 1571. Very popular in England. While not slighting the more severe virtues like courage and duty, Castiglione specializes in attractive deportment. His famous virtue "sprezzatura," which Hoby translates as "carelessness," clearly has its origin in the Stoic prohibition of affectation, which Castiglione's discourse also detests.

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Given that in Shakespeare's time the most common way to persuade a reader that something was true or good was to attach a classical citation to it, it seems presumptuous of us to attempt to read Shakespeare without even the barest knowledge of the fundamental moral authorities. With so many vernacular

translations and digests of classical morality available, there never was a better time than Shakespeare's to become, as Swift put it, "deep learned and shallow read." This is one more reason why one does not need to postulate a Lord Oxford or a Sir Francis Bacon to explain the splendid erudition of the works of a shoemaker's son of Stratford. Those cranks who believe that the "Stratfordian Claimant" was too ignorant to have produced the plays that bear his name underestimate the educative power of a barrage of translators harnessed to a printing press. The book trade was the Internet of Shakespeare's time, bringing the power of esoteric knowledge to the people.

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The ultimate proof that Shakespeare was a Stoic is of course the presence of Stoic discourse in his plays. But without a special sensitivity, it is very difficult to detect the Stoic presence, because Stoicism is, for us, counter-intuitive. One small example: when, in *The Merchant of Venice*, Shylock's daughter Jessica, having eloped with Lorenzo, spends fourscore ducats in one evening, we understand it the way her father does--as outrageously extravagant. A Stoic would call it "magnificent." Very simply, we think that saving money is a virtue; Elizabethans, except for Puritans, thought it was a vice: give it away; be good; do good; God or someone will provide; saving is a sign of mistrust toward God and men. Our attitude toward money is just one reason why we have for some time (in some cases for centuries) been reading Shakespeare's plays not just wrong but upside down and backwards.

In the book that follows I shall try to establish that reading Shakespeare as an extension of Stoicism produces a better fit to what's on the page than reading him as an extension of USA today.