

## “CONSCIOUS SIN”:

### SENECA, SARAH KANE AND THE APPRAISAL OF EMOTION

Elizabeth Barry

*University of Warwick*

- 122** Sarah Kane once said of her chosen medium that “Theatre has no memory, which makes it the most existential of the arts” (*The Guardian*, 13 August 1998). What, then, is to be gained by making a comparison between her 1996 play *Phaedra’s Love*<sup>1</sup> and the ancient tragedy by Seneca that she follows—but also leaves firmly in the past? Kane herself warned off those who might try. She claimed only to have read Seneca’s play once (Saunders 72), after she saw her contemporary Caryl Churchill’s 1991 version of Seneca’s *Thyestes*, and the Gate theatre asked her to contribute to a season of rewrites of the classics (though Seneca was her own choice). She was indeed somewhat suspicious of the whole enterprise, making clear in a later interview that she “didn’t want to get too much into [Seneca’s version]—I certainly didn’t want to write a play that you couldn’t understand unless you knew the original.” She wanted, as she said, the work “to stand completely on its own” (Interview with Nils Tabert, 1998, qtd. in Saunders 72). This is unsurprising to those who know her writing. Her theatre is, as is by now well known, experiential in style, citing avant-garde writers and dramaturges Samuel Beckett and Howard Barker as its influences (Sierz 102), and working, as Beckett would have had it, “on the nerves of the audience, not on its intellect” (qtd. in Brater 200). To suggest that she follows her Elizabethan forbears in a tradition of Senecan theatre seems wide of the mark.

The reception of Kane’s play, despite the classical frame given by the Gate season, was also determined by what the press saw as a new movement in contemporary British theatre. She was one of the “rude brood” of the mid-1990s, a group of playwrights also including Patrick Marber, Mark Ravenhill and Martin McDonagh, whose common cause was the writing of vivid, no-holds-barred new plays about the present, as unflinching in their treatment of the sexual politics and urban violence of their day as fellow Royal Court writers John Osborne and John Arden had been

in theirs (see C. Armistead, S. Brown). The plays' brutalist style and colourful urban idiom made for vibrant theatre, but their sensibility was seen as that of a deracinated generation—"Thatcher's children"—that had internalized the lesson that there was 'no society', no meaningful collective response remaining to the alienation of a late-capitalist market economy (Sierz 39). Could Kane, consciously working to create a theatre that was experiential and contemporary, really speak to the spirit and concerns of Seneca's work?

Kane's play takes the skeleton of Seneca's story (and that of Euripides before him): Phaedra, wife of the absent king Theseus, falls in love with her stepson, Hippolytus, who is dismissive of the possibility of love with anyone. Deeply wounded by his behaviour, and made anxious by the king's return, Phaedra accuses him of rape, and then kills herself (although we do not see this last act, as we do in Seneca's version, or hear her reasons for doing so). Hippolytus is also killed: in Euripides and Seneca's stories by a sea monster; in Kane's version by an angry mob (which, in Kane's play, also kills Theseus). The divergences from Seneca's original at first sight appear striking. Hippolytus's chastity becomes promiscuity, his beauty ugliness, and his love for the woods and the wilds a penchant for hiding indoors and watching television. In another sense, however, he is just as aloof and unattainable as in the original, also has a fatal—if indefinable—attractiveness, and his choice of violent films is perhaps a kind of attenuated modern version of the love of the hunt. One thing is significantly different: his relations with women (appearing to use them carelessly for casual sex) are hardly exemplary, but his antipathy is towards both sexes, unlike the woman-hating Senecan character, and his sexual promiscuity also extends to men as well as women. In terms of plot, too, Kane's play registers a significant difference. There is greater scrutiny of the relationships of this ruling family with the society around them, the end of the play involving a scene where they confront the adoring populace turned vengeful mob. Kane also adds Phaedra's daughter, Strophe, from a previous liaison, a confidante to the queen like Seneca's Nurse, but one who is implicated more directly in the web of semi-incestuous relationships, having herself slept with Theseus and Hippolytus. The family's decadent sexual activities are exposed by the conflict between Hippolytus and Phaedra, and Kane examines the prurient interest that the media and public have in such a family, and the knife-edge that can exist—particularly in the celebrity culture that was beginning to develop in the era she is writing—between adulation and destructive antipathy.

Commentators and critics have emphasized the distance that Kane travels from Seneca's *Phaedra*. Graham Saunders sees Kane's play as a "personal reinterpretation" which "departs radically from the Seneca source", although his suggestion that the "role of free will in embracing a tragic fate" is one such departure is an argument with which this article will take issue (Saunders 72). The classical scholar Edith Hall, observing that such Greek and Roman classics could "offer an opportunity for each successive generation to explore its psychosocial identity and preoccupations", saw *Phaedra's Love* as a missed opportunity in this respect, the bare bones of the clas-

sical narrative that survived merely constituting a pretext for Kane to “offload her facile objections to monarchy as an institution” (Hall, *TLS*). The exploration of the destructive relationship between monarchy and public was a nightmarish fantasy in the mid-1990s when Kane was writing, perhaps, but contained enough parallels with future events to seem eerily prescient later, and is, as has been seen, one of the significant departures Kane makes from Seneca’s play. While most criticism on the play sees the depiction of the monarchy as a relatively minor aspect, Hall’s review nonetheless underlines the fact that the play did not immediately strike its audience as speaking seriously to Seneca’s work.

Putting the two plays side by side does still allow for some revealing comparisons. What was it that appealed to Kane—against her expectations—in Seneca’s play? Some of the nods to Seneca are in the form of neat plot and character reversals, some in her spare but significant textual borrowings, and some in the interest of both writers in uncompromising principles of human interaction. Kane and Seneca also share concerns about those living in luxury, attached to material objects and overly concerned about status in their respective eras. And even without (presumably) reading much, if any, of Seneca’s prose, where the topic is frequently treated, Kane could not fail to identify in the tragedies she knew a preoccupation with death and suicide which even at this point in her short career (ending with her own suicide in 1999) she herself felt bound to explore. To the depiction of social and private turmoil, finally, both she and Seneca brought not only an “insistent grimness” (Segal 6), as Charles Segal puts it in relation to Seneca, but also a dark humour that is intimately connected to the appraisal of the emotions that both plays offer.

There are of course limitations to the comparison, not least imposed by comparing a philosophical tragedy with a work of experiential theatre. The emotional sensibility of Kane’s Hippolytus and Phaedra also skirts dangerously close at times to theatrical and romantic cliché (the rogue reformed—or perhaps the misanthrope ‘cured’—by love; the lovesick woman deranged by her own desire for a ‘rational’ and emotionally unavailable man). What redeems her version from cliché, however (other than the acerbic writing and mordant humour) is the fact that Kane inhabits both perspectives—complete submission to the passions, and complete rejection of attachment to externals—in the writing of the play, allowing each to follow its own logic, and is as uncompromising as Seneca about the destructive outcomes they might deliver.<sup>2</sup>

Kane follows Seneca in the framing metaphor that both pursue in their work: that of the need for a medicine of the soul. The characters in the early scenes of Kane’s work all seek a “cure” for ills that do not originate in the body (although they may manifest their effects there). Phaedra demands a “diagnosis” for Hippolytus from the doctor in Scene 2: this is, after all, what money can demand and the specialized, technological modern world can furnish (68). Mental anguish is less amenable to treatment than physical pain, however, especially when it is the existential pain, with no fixed cause or object, that Hippolytus feels. “There’s nothing clinically wrong”, the doctor firmly asserts (62). As Strophe says to Phaedra in Scene 3: “Don’t imagine

you can cure him" (67). And while Strophe advises Phaedra herself to "see a doctor" (68) in this scene, lovesickness is no longer a medical condition (and was never one straightforward to treat).

As for Seneca, who talked of philosophy as offering "prescriptions" to heal "ulcerous" mental sores, or the older Stoic, Chrysippus, who talks of an art to deal with the "diseased soul", in Kane's play the cure in such cases lies in practical philosophy: self-examination, rigorous principles for living, and if this fails in the face of life's vicissitudes, the release of death (Seneca, *Epistulae Morales* 8.2, and Chrysippus in Galen, *De Placitis Hippocratis et Platonis* 5.2.22, both qtd. in Nussbaum, *Therapy* 13-14, 316; Mannering). Yet there is one crucial difference in the diagnosed mental or moral 'sickness' in Kane's play. Hippolytus's detachment from the world itself is brought under the category of an illness of the soul. For Kane, in line with the modern sensibility her play reflects, the Stoic view, given voice in Hippolytus, that nothing external is worthy of serious concern, now seems a pathological one. Hippolytus, for much of the play at least, draws the opposite lesson from this detachment than that advocated by Seneca, expressing his unconcern through careless cruelty rather than the disinterested judgement or mercy that Seneca counsels in *On Anger* and *On Clemency* (see Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought* 362-67). Where the Stoic would make his/her own good nature and rational purpose the object of thought and action, Hippolytus is all but purposeless to start with, and the honesty he cultivates often brutal and unethical. He is the very epitome of the "harshness of apathy" (*duritia*, *Epistulae Morales* 18.5) against which Seneca warns (see Mannering).

125

As events push Hippolytus towards a kind of self-determination, however, in choosing to accept Phaedra's rape accusation and the fate it will impose, this honesty is transformed into a kind of integrity—what Brad Inwood has called in interpreting Seneca on this theme the "proper agency" of an autonomous individual (311). Stoic in feel, too, is Hippolytus's (and the play's) growing emphasis on self-examination and rationality, in the knowledge of the imminence of death, exemplified by his conversations with his step-sister Strophe and a Priest in Scenes 5 and 6, in which he examines his reasons for submitting to the country's judgement (even if he is—technically speaking—innocent), and in refusing to confess his sins to the God he denies before death. His refusal from the beginning to participate in the politics of his country, and his disdain for the collective sensibility of its people (a position supported to some extent by the (literally) rapacious 'mob' that appears at the end of Kane's play) can be seen as a form of the "determined denial of a menacing or absurd world" by which Paul Veyne characterizes Stoicism (*Life* x). Although Saunders argues that Kane departs from Seneca's play and philosophy in emphasizing the role of free will in Hippolytus's embracing of death (Saunders 72), this in particular, as will be seen, actually seems directly in line with the Stoic dictum, articulated by Seneca, that one gains "mastery of oneself by learning to acquiesce to fate willingly" (Mannering).

Kane's ending also resembles those of Seneca—featuring in this play, and elsewhere, a striking central image that pushes theatrical representation to its limits. Medea

appears clothed in the Sun's red light, hurling the limbs of her children down on her former husband in Seneca's *Medea*; Theseus assembles the body parts of his dead son in Seneca's *Phaedra*; Hippolytus, disembowelled and castrated, sees vultures descend to pick at his entrails in Kane's *Phaedra's Love*. Kane, like Seneca, offers gruesome images of death with which the victims deal stoically (at least in the popular sense) if not with insouciance. These also constitute in the case of both writers theatrical spectacles that seem to defy the constraints of the medium itself. Such extravagantly grotesque scenes have fuelled the argument that Seneca was not writing for the theatre at all, but that these are plays for recitation (Zwierlein), although this view is no longer the dominant one, and arguments about Seneca's awareness of stagecraft and dramaturgy have more recently been made.<sup>3</sup> As might be argued of Seneca, Kane was consciously testing the boundaries of what was possible in the theatre, becoming infamous for her blithe stage directions detailing near-unrealizable effects: Ian, at the end of *Blasted*, "lies down, head poking out of the floor. / He dies with relief" (60); the moment in *Cleansed* when "A sunflower bursts through the floor and grows above their heads" (*Complete Plays* 120) or "There are two rats, one chewing at Grace/Graham's wounds" (*Complete Plays* 149). In the case of both writers these scenes can seem unintentionally—or perhaps intentionally—comic, but there is a purpose to this extravagance: death is for both writers an escape from the trials of the everyday, but also its banality.<sup>4</sup>

Watching the treatment of death in Seneca's *Thyestes*, in Caryl Churchill's lively interpretation, might indeed have struck a chord with Kane. The division between the living and the dead is particularly permeable in Seneca's ghost-ridden theatre. The ghost of Tantalus in *Thyestes* fears that the world to which he is being dragged back could furnish punishments worse than the tortures of the underworld. The scenes he pictures prefigure the death of Hippolytus in Kane's *Phaedra's Love*, his entrails picked at by vultures:

Tantalus: [...]	Who's dragging me grabbing me avidly up from the unlucky underworld? [...] Have you found something worse than burning thirst in a stream? [...] or lying open a vast cave of guts dug out to feed dark birds [...] If there's any space available in hell I'll take it.
-----------------	---

(Churchill 321)

Despite the vivid tortures he sets out here, the speech is wrapped up with a blackly

comic line. The unstageable scenes of Kane's theatre are also marked by a striking contrast between visual grotesquerie and verbal poise. Kane's earlier play *Blasted* contains Senecan horrors such as the eating of a child, mutilation, and a kind of failed burial (the dead Ian's head poking out of the floorboards at the end of the play), and the uncertainty over the dividing line between life and death is given a new dramatic form when Ian speaks after the stage directions indicate that he has died:

[Ian] *eats the baby.*  
*He puts the remains back in the baby's blanket and puts the bundle back in the hole.*  
*A beat, then he climbs in after it and lies down, head poking out of the floor.*

*He dies with relief.*  
*It starts to rain on him, coming through the roof.*  
*Eventually.*  
 Ian: Shit.

(57-8)

Yet these absurd scenes, while given a certain humour by Kane's laconic dialogue, are soberly treated. After seeing Churchill's rendition of Seneca, however, Kane takes a slightly different tone. As with Ian's, some vestige of Hippolytus's self also seems to survive fatal injury long enough to look coolly on the scene of his own dismemberment:

*The three bodies lie completely still.*  
*Eventually, Hippolytus opens his eyes and looks at the sky.*  
 Hippolytus: Vultures.  
*(He manages a smile.)*  
 If there could have been more moments like this.  
*(He dies.)*

(97)

Perhaps influenced by what Emma Buckley has called the "complete dramatic and metaliterary self-awareness" of Seneca's characters in *Thyestes*, however, Kane makes Hippolytus's comment on his own death more darkly playful than those of Ian. If not quite leaving life gladly, as Seneca counselled, he appreciates the spectacle of his own punishment as archly as Churchill's Tantalus seems to do, delivering a similarly 'killer' line.

The relish for the prospect of death, as well as the bracing evaluation of its process, are aspects of Hippolytus's 'project' of self-perfection in Kane's play that align it especially closely with Seneca's teachings. Another is the role of materialism—and indeed in both there is an explicit relationship between the boredom this materialism can engender and the cure that is one's willed death. The meditations on the vulnerability of the wealthy and privileged to harmful excess, a rhetorical set piece by the Nurse in Act I of Seneca's *Phaedra*, gain a new context in dialogue with Kane's play. The Nurse in Seneca's original observes to Phaedra:

...people who overindulge themselves amidst too much prosperity and live extrava-

gantly are always looking for something new and unusual. That's exactly when that dreaded companion of great fortune, Excess, rears its ugly head.... Ask yourself: why... do the rich and powerful always seek more than is decent?

(tr. Scott Smith 113)

It is Hippolytus, rather than Phaedra, who seems to suffer such a malady in *Phaedra's Love*. Chronically bored and indulged, he over-eats, watches ever more violent films, toys with and discards the many presents the people give him, and indulges an insatiable sexual addiction that brings him no pleasure. He is not unmindful, however, of the Stoic solution to this predicament: he has no emotional investment in material things, and wants to opt out of the culture whereby the material goods he is given by the people constitute marks of esteem:

Hippolytus: [...] (*He opens a present.*) What the fuck am I going to do with a bagatelle. What's this? (*He shakes / a present.*) Letter bomb. Get rid of this tat, give it to Oxfam, I don't need it. (70-71)

128

What can sound or read as mere ingratitude (and certainly is this) is also part of his rejection of the external elements of his life, a process which by the end of the play has become a more positive form of self-sufficiency and integrity.<sup>5</sup> That he also seems to accede to the "mental tranquillity" that comes from "eradicating the fear of death", as Mannering elsewhere summarizes Seneca's project, at first seems incidental, but as the imminence of his death becomes a certainty, his careless attitude to life is matched in a coolly logical way by a similar unconcern for its removal.

The other dimension of Seneca's self-sufficiency, the attitude it produces towards civic life, also begins to seem increasingly applicable to Kane's Hippolytus. Seneca did not advocate withdrawal from civic life: he wrote a substantial work (*De Beneficiis*) on the idea of social reciprocity and argues for one's responsibility to engage in public duties (*De Tranquillitate Animi* 1.10; see Mannering). A wise man may, however, withdraw from a society that is overly corrupt or unreasonably demanding (*De Otio* 3.5; see Mannering). Kane's Hippolytus seems to start the play—or so it seems—as an exemplum and perverted role model for his corrupt society: lazy, disengaged, sexually incontinent and amused by violent entertainment. Yet his encounters with its authorities, by proxy (via Phaedra) with the callous Doctor, and more directly with the hypocritical Priest, suggest that he is a truth teller who can withstand his society's heartlessness and cut through its cant. Kane says of the character that she always found him sympathetic because "he's always completely and utterly direct with everyone no matter what the outcome is going to be for him and for others. You can never misunderstand anything he is saying" (interview with Nils Tabert, qtd. in Saunders 79). By the time he becomes a victim of the braying mob which seeks his blood, his disengagement from politics seems far preferable to their lustful appetite for demagoguery. What are they, Kane seems to ask, if not unreasonable and excessive (not to mention fickle) in their demands on their royal family?

Without presuming any knowledge of the text on Kane's part, the Stoic Marcus

Aurelius's famously prosaic description of sex also comes to mind in thinking about the desultory and joyless experiences of Kane's Hippolytus. Marcus Aurelius counsels exercises in cognitive re-education whereby formerly pleasurable things are reduced to their material elements, and their allure removed. Sex becomes, "Friction against my groin and a small secretion of mucus accompanied by a spasm" (*Meditations* 6.13.1; qtd. in Bartsch, 'Senecan Metaphor'). For Hippolytus, who is seen, in the play's memorable opening, ejaculating into a sock "without a flicker of pleasure" (61), and in Scene 4 responding minimally to the sexual act Phaedra performs on him "without taking his eyes off the television" (76), this demystification has already been achieved, and he submits to oral sex with Phaedra in order that she might have a similar enlightenment: "There. Mystery over" (76). This is less a deliberate choice than an unwelcome malaise in Hippolytus's case, certainly, but it comes to inform his principles for living nonetheless, and in contrast with Phaedra, literally silly with passion, it comes to seem the better choice. He has taken one step towards Stoic enlightenment, removing the mystery from material wealth, sensual pleasure and worldly power, and preventing himself getting attached to these things; what he needs, however, is something in their place.

129

For Kane's Hippolytus, like Seneca, sex is interesting as a prism for the exploration of ethics. Rather than simply focusing on his own self-accomplishment, he uses sex to offer ethical lessons to others. The cruel demystification of the act of sex with Phaedra is a brutal form of the Stoic prescription to remove from sex its pleasure and therefore its power to distract or enthrall. Later, however, a similar sexual act with the Priest is used to demonstrate the Priest's hypocrisy and to give him an experiential knowledge of sin. Sex with Hippolytus removes the mystique of love for Phaedra, and the mystique of religion for the Priest, a service that becomes in the latter scene a kind of religious office in itself:

Hippolytus: I know what I am. And always will be. But you. You sin knowing you'll confess. Then you're forgiven. And then you start all over again. How do you dare mock a God so powerful? Unless you don't really believe.

[...]

May we burn in hell. God may be all powerful, but there's one thing he can't do.

Priest: There's a kind of purity in you.

Hippolytus: He can't make me good.

[...]

Priest: (*Performs oral sex on Hippolytus.*)

Hippolytus: Leave that to you.

(*He comes.*)

*He rests his hand on top of the Priest's head.*

Go.

Confess.

Before you burn. (90-91)

If we can accept him as such, the physically and emotionally unappealing Hippolytus becomes a kind of deliverer, providing for the other characters as well as for him-



self an experiential understanding of the truth and the limitations of their outward attachments. For both Phaedra and the Priest, these experiences divest them of their attachment to an external (or quasi-external) object, Hippolytus and God respectively, and send them back to their own resources. Even though the Priest is sent away to “confess”, he seems to have acquired a new understanding of and access to “purity” from Hippolytus that can (unlike the spiritual purity he has been conditioned to seek) accommodate his own desire.

130 This Hippolytus perhaps reflects a version of the Senecan subject that post-dates that of the Stoic himself (see Bartsch, *Mirror* 232-254). The Senecan subject who features in the work of Michel Foucault, often seen to be more Foucault’s creation than Seneca’s (Bartsch, *Mirror*; Vogt; Mannering), might be a truer model for Kane’s Hippolytus than the self-contained and ascetic Senecan hero. Foucault, despite the centrality of sexuality to his scholarship, is as little interested in sex for its own sake as Seneca (in his way) and Hippolytus (in his), commenting, as Davidson writes, on several occasions, “sex is so boring” (Davidson 123). Instead, he mines its history for what he sees as its ethical or political significance in his three-volume *History of Sexuality*, exploring in volume three (*The Care of the Self*) those “contours of the political self”, as Dean Hammer puts it (185), that emerge in Seneca’s writing. Foucault in his reading of Seneca’s project of self-cultivation sees one version of the Stoic self step away from the emphasis in Roman society on outward status (including—something we can fully recognize in Kane’s Hippolytus—from dressing and grooming) to concentrate on “what one is purely in relation to oneself” (Foucault 85). Whether or not one can identify Hippolytus’s preoccupation with masturbation as representing what Foucault calls, in relation to Seneca, “the experience of a pleasure that one takes in oneself” (Foucault 66-67), the gladness “born in [one’s] house” and which, coming from the self, “will never fail you” (Seneca, *Epistle XXIII*, quoted in Foucault 66-67), his tendency to put his inclinations first, initially a kind of hedonism, becomes a more properly sober quest for what Paul Veyne has called Foucault’s idea of an “autonomy that modernity cannot do without” (Veyne, ‘Foucault’ 7; see also Davidson 128). Kane’s references in the latter part of her play to Hippolytus’s “honesty” and “purity”, and the closing scenes where Hippolytus (like Hedda Gabler) seems to appreciate the theatrical and aesthetic power of the scene of his own death, do align him (paradoxically, given his unsavoury behaviours) with Foucault’s reading of Stoic self-cultivation, in which askēsis is “an esthetic choice...the will to live a beautiful life, and to leave others memories of a beautiful existence” (Foucault 341). This reading, as Shadi Bartsch has argued, reflects Foucault’s emphasis rather than Seneca’s, finding “little support in the [Senecan] sources” (*Mirror* 253).

Although Hippolytus may look more like Foucault’s ethical hero than Seneca’s, the Roman philosopher, so morally uncompromising in other ways, is surprisingly sympathetic to those he sees in his own society who resemble Kane’s character warts and all. Again, no influence can be assumed, but there is an uncanny convergence between Kane’s characterization of Hippolytus and Seneca’s depiction of the aris-

toocrat who might be literally bored to death, his rational purpose so compromised that dying might be the preferable solution. Here Seneca addresses this blighted individual:

Is there anything you have to look forward to? You've already consumed the very pleasures that delay and retain you [from killing yourself]. You find not one of them novel; they're all tiresome because of sheer abundance....You're thoroughly familiar with how oyster and mullet taste; your luxury has left you nothing untouched in the years to come. And these are the things from which you're unwilling to be separated. What else is there you would grieve to have snatched away? (*Letters* 77, 16-17, qtd. in Busch 256)

Seneca recognizes, as Austin Busch has argued, that life can be tenuous and painful no matter what befalls you: "if one suffers, the suffering is often unbearable; if one prospers, prosperity itself becomes tedious". Even when illness and injustice are removed, life "rears its head in intolerable ennui" (256). From this perspective, Seneca suggests, death is a welcome release from this struggle, a "fleeing" (*On Providence* 6.7, qtd. in Busch 260) from the exigencies of fortune: "Death has a bad reputation...But this you know: how many people it helps, how many it frees from torments, deprivation, complaints, punishments, boredom" (Seneca, *Letters* 91.21, qtd. in Busch 257). This outlook, at once gloomy and bracing, is one that finds an uncannily close echo in Kane's play. Hippolytus certainly feels this release from boredom, as his comment as the vultures descend, "if there could have been more moments like this. [*He dies.*]" (97), once more illustrates. In choosing to accept Phaedra's accusation, he makes a conscious and autonomous choice to die, something that would give purpose and integrity to his action in Seneca's eyes. Even the archness of Hippolytus's closing line could have been prescribed by Seneca, who makes of death the close of a drama (and this flourish, as in the previous quotation, the end of a letter): "as in a play, so in life: it's not how long it lasts but how well it's performed that counts" (*Letters* 77.20, qtd. in Busch 257). From a certain perspective, Hippolytus, master of the killer one-liners, has—in spite of everything—lived well.

The discussion has so far been relatively reticent about the character of Phaedra in Kane's play. How does she compare to her namesake in Seneca's play? This reticence is in part because Phaedra vanishes from Kane's version well before her suicide, never confronting Theseus (whose role in Kane's work is minimal) or voicing the reasons for her suicide. In one respect, however, she follows in the tradition of Seneca's Phaedra—and also the philosopher himself in his prose writing: she conveys her feelings through metaphor, and the violent metaphors of destruction (fire, wind, violent injury) that Seneca also favours. Martha Nussbaum observes in her study of emotions in classical (and other) philosophy that "even philosophers who argue for a cognitive view of emotions...speak of them" as powerful and overwhelming, and hence problematic for the self in making one feel "passive or powerless before them". It is the Stoic Seneca she turns to as example, observing that he is "fond of comparisons of emotions to fire, to the currents of the sea, to fierce gales, to intruding forces that hurl the self about, cause it to explode, cut it up, tear it limb from limb" (*Upheavals* 26-7).<sup>6</sup>

These images are rife in Seneca's *Phaedra*. Taking one example, The Chorus say of Phaedra's passion in Act II:

That fire is heaven-sent, accursed,  
unquenchable—trust those that it's burned!

(tr. Scott Smith 116)

Even the chaste Hippolytus perceives this passionate but destructive quality in her, saying hopefully: "The love with which you burn—no doubt it's the pure love you feel for Theseus" (tr. Scott Smith 125) in Act II. Seneca may advocate rationality over passion, counselling detachment from all external things and people (*externa contemnunt*, Seneca, *On Providence* 6.1, qtd. in Mannering), but his tragedies take full account of the difficulty of achieving this and the trials to which the passions submit us.

**132** Kane preserves these metaphors, conspicuous in the boiled-down urban idiom that her play (and theatrical oeuvre) favours. Phaedra's passion for Hippolytus "burns", as it does for Seneca's (and Racine's) Phaedra before her. In Kane's play, the first instance of this image is one that mingles strangely with the imagery of the Christian evangelism with which she was raised, Phaedra's love "a spear in my side, burning" (69). This image also echoes the scene in Seneca's play, however, where Phaedra desires Hippolytus to stab her to death in a quasi-erotic self-sacrifice in place of the consummation she cannot achieve. Kane's Phaedra repeats the image of burning almost obsessively in this scene, bearing witness to the feeling of physical destruction of the self also found in Seneca. Two examples can be given from Scene 3 where she is in conversation with her daughter, Strophe—an uncomfortable confidante in this context:

Phaedra: There's a thing between us, an awesome fucking thing, can you feel it? It burns. (71)

Phaedra: Can't switch this thing off. Can't crush it. Can't. Wake up with it, burning me. Think I'll crack open I want him so much. (71)

Strophe's responses to these outbursts are firmly pragmatic, however, the first a flat "No"; the second the line mentioned above: "Don't imagine you can cure him". In Kane's play, unlike Seneca's, some of the positive erotic charge of passion, denied in Stoic thought, inheres in Phaedra's descriptions, but Strophe's attitude and our expectation of Hippolytus's indifference also gives them the quality of delusion.

The fact that the other characters such as the Chorus and Hippolytus also use these metaphors in Seneca's play gives them a different status there. Some commentators have observed of Seneca's *Phaedra* that the whole thing feels like a phantasmagoria, its unreality produced not only by the unstable perspective created by Phaedra's distracted mental state, but also the pervasive state of chaos that the passions can effect in the whole physical world of the play in accordance with Stoic beliefs about the

interconnectedness of the mind (*psyche*) and physical matter (*physis*) (Lapidge 161-72). In Henry and Walker's argument, the *furor*, or frenzy, an image used twenty-two times in Seneca's play, is not just confined to Phaedra, but infects all the characters (Theseus away on a lustful adulterous mission; even Hippolytus in his irrational hatred for women) (231). Kane's play, as might be expected, treats Phaedra's feelings differently, isolating these images as an idiolect expressive of Phaedra's own disordered and confabulating state of mind. The status of these figures of speech and the emotions they reflect is not unambiguous, however. The characters in Kane's play are less sensitive to Phaedra's feelings than those in Seneca's play, and we as audience are initially encouraged to join them in their impatience. The narrative frame which they are given is, however, crucially different in Kane's case. The story as it unfolds in her play is ultimately more sympathetic to the passions that provoke these feelings than that of Seneca. Despite the impression given by the first few scenes of *Phaedra's Love*, in which Hippolytus (cruelly) and the doctor and Strophe (relatively kindly) deflate in flat terms the extravagant beliefs and postures of Phaedra, the play does not pit the (true, sane, pragmatic) literal against the (false, deranged, fantastical) symbolic, either linguistically or in terms of state of mind. For Hippolytus is indeed also "in pain" (79), as Phaedra surmises, and a rebalancing must take place where he becomes more mindful of externals, and sympathetic to emotions, as Phaedra releases herself from their grip. Hippolytus's language may never become more figurative or his passions more inflamed than at the outset, and he commands an impressively stoic (and even Stoic) resolve towards death, but his actions suggest not only a softening in attitude towards Phaedra, but a degree of concession towards her perspective that the Stoics would not countenance.

133

A neat narrative reversal in Kane's play makes this point clearer. In Seneca's *Phaedra*, the queen says to Hippolytus, after he threatens to kill her: "Hippolytus, now you are fulfilling my prayers: you are healing a sick woman. That is even more than I dreamed of—I will die in your arms but with my virtue still intact" (tr. Scott Smith 127). Death for her at this moment, in line with the Stoic thinking this paper has been discussing, is freedom and salvation from shame and self-division. This offering of herself to Hippolytus's sword has a sexual dimension to it from which Hippolytus recoils, however, taking back the threat and fleeing even this kind of contact with a woman. In Kane's play, there is a reversal of this imagined sacrifice; in this play, Phaedra is the one to save Hippolytus, paradoxically by accusing him and causing his death at the hands of the mob. This death answers his prayers, giving what remains of his life some meaning, and giving him the chance to choose to acquiesce. His malaise is cured and he gains a new sense of purpose and clarity in the period before his death. This is how he puts it:

Hippolytus: This is her present to me.

Strophe: What?

Hippolytus: Not many people get a chance like this.

This isn't tat. This isn't bric-a-brac. (90)

And, a few lines later:

Hippolytus: She really did love me.

Strophe: You didn't do it.

Hippolytus: Bless her. (91)

This gift (of the occasion for self-destruction) constitutes and proves Phaedra's love for Hippolytus, just as the imagined stabbing of Phaedra in Seneca's play appears to her like a kind of consummation of their love.

134 The mechanism for this perverse salvation also challenges the dynamic established in the first few scenes of the play whereby rationality and common sense (conveyed through literal language) trump passion (represented in figures). Kane's play turns on radical reinterpretations of the literal meaning of words used: 'rape', 'gift', 'love', 'live' (as well as 'purity' above). When Hippolytus hears about Phaedra's accusation, he does not refute it, despite the fact that she instigated the sexual act. He recognizes Strophe's description of the mental and emotional cruelty he inflicted upon her, presumably by similarly engaging in sex with her without either love or even affection:

Strophe: Did you force her?

Hippolytus: Did I force you?

Strophe: There aren't words for what you did to me.

Hippolytus: Then perhaps rapist is the best she can do. (87)

He sees that 'rape' is a plausible substitute for what happened in both cases, an analogy for the emotional damage caused and the humiliation associated with a sexual act without intimacy or respect. Nonetheless, in literal terms 'rape' has applied to a sexual act in which the victim took the active role, a 'gift' of incrimination and unjust retribution has been perceived as an act of love, and Hippolytus only begins truly living as he dies. The commonsense value of the prosaic in the first few scenes has given way to a more poetic logic. What Phaedra in fact gives Hippolytus is the opportunity and the ability to live in the imagination, in the contingent, in the possible, rather than in the bleak and foreshortened world of the actual, where repetition has dulled all sensation and surprise is banished. The concept of the unspeakable refers to the shameful crime (conveyed by the term *nefas*—literally that which cannot be spoken) in Seneca's play, but it is the starting point from which hope (and a kind of compassion) begins in Kane's.<sup>7</sup>

The connections that can be made between Kane's work and Seneca's, then, are not indicative of an extensive debt of influence beyond the one-act *Phaedra*, but there are suggestive parallels and divergences in both style and substance. The overlap in the writers' concerns goes beyond a predilection in the writing of tragedy for philosophy, passion and gore to encompass sharp observations on such topics as luxury, boredom, adultery and, perhaps most significantly, death. The depiction of death in both Senecan tragedy and Kane's tragicomic *oeuvre* evades easy interpretation, however.

Neither offers the boons of articulate suffering, reflection and knowledge that an Aristotelian tragedy would, and their lessons about how to feel and think are hence more oblique. There is a gap, in particular, between Seneca's invigorating discussions of death as a choice that proves our autonomy and releases us from life's woes in his philosophy, and the senseless death and physical disintegration of Hippolytus in his tragedy. Even the rational reasons for Phaedra's death, there, are displaced by the sexualized act of stabbing herself, an act that responds as much to her frustration at her unconsummated passion as to concern for her personal virtue. Kane restores the "self's radical autonomy" (Busch 262) that Seneca looks for in his philosophy to the act of death in her rewriting of the play, giving Hippolytus an exhilarating existential choice to make, but acknowledges that in a tragic story like the one she inherits, dealing with the messiness of human passions as it does, no choice is entirely without connection to or repercussion for other human beings. Integrity itself is meaningless if it takes no account of the conditions in which it operates—the conditions those human beings create.

## NOTES

1. Sarah Kane's *Phaedra's Love* was first performed at the Gate Theatre, London, on 15 May 1996. It was published with her first play, *Blasted*, as *Blasted & Phaedra's Love* (London: Methuen Drama, 2006). All references to *Phaedra's Love* are to this edition.
2. Kane said to Nils Tabert in interview that she wanted to "connect the two extremes [of love and detachment] in her head" (qtd. in Saunders 73).
3. See Fitch in Harrison (ed.) 1-3, 5-7, for details of this debate and the arguments on each side; and Boyle, Kragelund, Stroh; see also Buckley.
4. On the black comedy of Seneca's work, see Meltzer and Levitan.
5. Kane is also likely remembering Thyestes at the end of Caryl Churchill's play—the work that inspired her own engagement with Seneca—who has relinquished his wealth and position without regret, in accordance with Stoic principles: "I don't / Stuff my stomach with tributes/ From tribes./ [...] I'm not worshipped with /Incense and flowers instead of Jove./ [...] I don't sleep all day or join/ Night to night with drink. / I'm not feared" (Churchill 321).
6. See also Nussbaum, *Therapy* chapter 12, for a discussion of such metaphors in Seneca's *Medea*.
7. See Schiesaro, *Passions* 38-39 and Bexley for discussions of *nefas* and its etymology.