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STOICISM IN THE RENAISSANCE AND SHAKESPEARE

Abstract:

This paper is an attempt to reconcile Renaissance values with stoicism which was one of the most significant schools of philosophy on which Renaissance writers like Petrarch, Montaigne, Shakespeare fell upon, the other being the Epicurean school. This paper in particular looks at the impact of Cicero on the development of Shakespeare's dramatic art keeping in mind the social and intellectual context of the Renaissance when Latin writers formed a formidable part of the school curriculum taught to the students. The paper shows how deeply ingrained classical thoughts were on the minds of the Renaissance writers.

When one examines the myriad of influences which shape the Renaissance, one comes across two important schools of philosophy which in the post renaissance period became less popular. These two schools are Epicureanism and Stoicism. As we know today, Renaissance itself begins with the Italian poet and translator Petrarch's discovery of Cicero's letters and later on Cicero's treatises like '*On Duties*' now in a latest translation known as '*On Obligations*', '*On the Nature of God*' and '*On Living and Dying Well*' and the immensely popular '*Tusculanum Disputations*' which inspired the Renaissance scholars to cultivate the art of eloquence. Another book which was very popular among renaissance scholars was *De Oratorio* by Cicero. The great Shakespeare scholar and new historic critic Stephen Greenblatt, in his 2011 Pulitzer prize winning book *The Swerve* has for the first time in detail showed how the atheistic and atomistic philosophy of Epicurus was a decisive factor in ushering in of the Renaissance after the medieval period.

Stoicism, as practiced by Cicero, was not a complete system of philosophy but a school of philosophy which was devoted to ethics i.e. how to live a good life and put one's skills in the service of the state. Cicero himself was a practicing politician who advocated the republican cause of Brutus and was finally murdered by henchmen of Mark Antony. Petrarch who was a priest was also a great bibliophile who went throughout Europe hunting for manuscripts by Greek and Roman masters. Petrarch himself did not know Greek but got them translated into Latin (by bringing them to Florence) and read them in Latin only. Since he was a priest, it would have been a scandal and a punishable offence if someone came to know that he was interested in the Godless philosopher Epicurus and was deeply interested in the stoic ideals.

Another great figure of Renaissance Erasmus, who wrote *In Praise of Folly*, knew both Greek and Latin and made the first translation of *The New Testament* into Latin. He was well aware and had read the works of Epicurus in Greek and the Roman stoics in Latin. It would be worthwhile to mention here that the two most popular stoics Seneca and Cicero wrote in Latin whereas Epicurus, Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius wrote in Greek. Since Latin was understood and taught in all Grammar Schools during Shakespeare's time, it is natural that the texts written in Latin would be more popular in Elizabethan England. We now know that during Shakespeare's time, for the whole week from early morning to late evening, students would memorize Latin phrases, practice Latin grammar and Latin oratory. Therefore, it is no wonder that Shakespeare knew his Plutarch, Pliny, Tacitus, Livy, and Ovid so well. When we talk about anachronism in *Julius Caesar*, we conveniently forget that Shakespeare knew his Roman history but he was writing for an audience which would identify Rome with current London, so clocks in Rome. The full name of the kind of Grammar Schools where Shakespeare got his education was The Latin Grammar School and the standard of Latin teaching was extremely high. King Henry VIII himself had established these Latin schools with a view to educating the people in classics. Queen Elizabeth was fluent in Latin as she was tutored by one of the greatest Latin scholars of those times Roger Ascham who wrote the famous book *The School Master*. Edmund Spencer got his Latin education at Melcaster and Ben Jonson under John Colet.

As mentioned earlier, Erasmus tried to mediate a middle way between Stoicism and Christianity. So most probably did one of the great models of Shakespeare Michel De Montaigne who was again an extra ordinary scholar, who knew his Greek and Latin very well, read all the classical masters like Plutarch. Montaigne was a bibliophile till his death and mixes the tenets of Stoicism, Epicureanism and a thin veneer of Roman Catholicism.

Before the renaissance began with Petrarch, the leading philosopher was Aristotle and his book *Physics* dominated the intellectual space. Those who practiced Aristotelian philosophy were called scholastics or schoolmen. The first line of *Metaphysics* is, "It is natural human desire to know"¹ and many of these Renaissance scholars had taken this line literally as their new found religion. Whether it was Petrarch, Poggio or the chancellor of Florence Salutati or the ruler Cosimo de Medici, they were filled up with zeal to further the cause of art and learning. They, for the first time, brought to life the fact that western culture had already scaled heights of knowledge and now has come down. The word 'Rebirth' indicates something which was lost and rediscovered. Interestingly Aristotle's *Physics* was known to the medieval period, but *Poetics* was discovered only during the Renaissance through Arabic translations. The other source of books and manuscripts besides the Florentines and other Italians was the flight of Christians with manuscripts to Italy after the fall of Constantinople in 1453. In Spain, the conquering Muslims had brought valuable manuscripts including Aristotle's works from Alexandria in Egypt. The Renaissance saw the publication of many classics which advised the king or the prince how to rule judiciously. The best examples are Machiavelli's *The Prince* and Castiglione's *The Courtier*. These books tried to present themselves in the same way as the books which Seneca wrote for Nero and Cicero wrote for the Roman Republican rulers.

The renaissance laid great stress upon imitation and eloquence because a humanist scholar wanted to unite 'Sapantia' i.e. wisdom and 'eloquentia' i.e. eloquence. Cicero believed: "Philosophy without oratory is sterile while oratory without philosophy is dangerous." For him,

Philosophy means ethics defining how men should behave while oratory means persuading men to behave in the ways defined by ethics. The orator must himself be a good man.²

It is a different matter that Cicero himself did not practice his own preaching.

The stoics were staunch believers in living their lives according to virtues. For them, the worldly things like wealth and health are indifferents, a wealthy man can either misuse his wealth or use his wealth in a proper manner. A strong man may use or misuse his strength. Having wealth or lacking strength is neither a virtue nor a vice, they are only things to which human beings should be indifferent. To live by virtue, according to stoics, means to engage in public duties in a manner which would be good for the people. Cicero argued for engagement or 'negotium' instead of retirement or 'otium' as propounded by Horace. That is why the ideal renaissance scholar was a man who was well read, eloquent and engaged in civic duties e.g. Sir Philip Sidney and Edmund Spenser. Sir Philip Sidney died in the battlefield and Sir Walter Raleigh was actively engaged in navigating the world and died in the tower of London. By that yardstick, today Shakespeare would be considered a Renaissance man as he knew his Roman classics like Ovid's *Metamorphosis* and also had read Homer's *Illiad* in Latin. Shakespeare, in play after play, uses rhetoric and eloquence to bring sapantia or wisdom to the community at large which shows his civic engagement. In his sonnets addressed to the young man, Shakespeare becomes an advisor and a tutor to the young patron whom he urges to get married and produce children so that his excellence could be reproduced.

This is the view of the Folger editors of the sonnets. Here Shakespeare is working in the mould of Castiglione advising the patron about his hidden qualities, potentials, his aims and his duties to engage with the world. In Shakespeare's comedies, we have examples of otium versus negotium i.e. retirement versus engagement, retreat into a wood and coming back to engage with civic life. Ultimately we find Shakespeare supports negotium i.e. engagement and return to the town. One of the reasons why retreat was portrayed by Renaissance writers in a negative light was because retreat was idealized by Epicurus and most Renaissance writers believed what Cicero had published i.e. the Epicureans were a bunch of Hedonistic philosophers indulging in sexual orgies. The Christian writer Jerome, after Cicero, went to the extent of saying that the great follower of Epicurus, the Roman poet Lucretius went mad because of a love potion. The crux of the problem is that it was Lucretius's Latin poem *The Return of Nature (De Rerum Natura)* which dismisses the notion of a creator as believed by Plato and Aristotle and propounds the theory of natural development of the world by movement of atoms. Such a theory if it had popular access would bring down the whole edifice of the church. We now know this subversive text was known to Montaigne, Cicero, Erasmus and Newton. The stoics and the Epicurean doctrine differs in belief and non- belief in God and religion. Shakespeare, who was well grounded in the stoic works of Seneca and Cicero, treats the Epicureans with satire and contempt like Ben Jonson who created the immortal character of Sir Epicure Mammon. The common Renaissance notion was the Epicureans sought only pleasure. Stoicism came closest to the Christian ideal with its notion of virtue and self-abnegation. Most stoic doctrines were appropriated by Christianity; in fact Erasmus translated many of Seneca's stoic works. The only stoic ideas which Christianity rejected were glorification of suicide which Seneca strongly advocated and belief in fate. For instance, even Montaigne who loved *The Republic* and Plato thought that Platonic ideas were unattainable and the stoic doctrines along with the biblical precept could be used as a guiding force for life. Although in his later phase of life he would not stay away from Epicurean doctrines as well and become a hard boiled skeptic.

Montaigne's ideas developed from a path of stoicism to inordinate skepticism as in his later life Montaigne considered stoics as intellectually arrogant and untrue to human nature which brought him closer to the Epicurean ideals where man's supreme duty was to live so wisely as to avoid pain and suffering.

Since Renaissance Christianity lived a life which was a mix of the Stoic and the Christian, this could be one of the reasons for arrogance towards the Pagans and the non-Christians. So great was the divide that the great Renaissance cartographer Abraham Ortelius in his collection of maps simply says to see Europeans for Christians.

During the Renaissance, few Europeans thought that they belong to a continent called Europe and believed that they belonged to individual countries. Europe was named after a Greek myth which became popular during Renaissance when the Roman poet Ovid was very popular. Only the highly educated could relate the name of the continent to the Greek myth. One of the greatest painters of Renaissance, Titian drew the famous painting '*The Rape of Europa*'. Europe is the only continent which is named after a myth, and that too a classical myth.

The stoic doctrines which were very popular during Renaissance, advocated the cardinal virtues of "Sapientia" i.e. wisdom and "Prudentia" i.e. "Practical Wisdom, 'knowledge of things to be sought and things to be avoided'".³

The stoics dismiss all studies related to abstruse things unlike the Aristotelians who, guided by Aristotle's *Physics*, want to find reasons behind every phenomenon. Cicero advocates a civic engagement for the public good and this model is perceivable in Bacon, Sidney, Wyatt and Surrey, Spenser and Shakespeare, even Marlowe who was secretly working as a spy.

If we look at Shakespeare's tragedies, most of his tragic characters, lack the virtue of 'Prudentia'. For instance, Lear shows terrible lack of prudentia when he quantifies love which is a quality and divides the kingdom instead of keeping it intact and united as a king. Prudentially speaking, it is a disaster. Similarly, Macbeth shows his lack of the prudentia when he decides to murder his king and kinsmen because in the Elizabethan plan of things to act against the king is to act against the god and invite the wrath of god.

Similarly, one can talk about lack of prudentia in most of his tragic heroes. In fact, *Prudentia* seems to be a better and a more telling word for the predicament of Shakespeare's tragic heroes than 'hamartia' or 'tragic flaw' which according to the editors of Cambridge Companion was never used by A. C. Bradley but was grafted by his followers on him. Today 'tragic flaw' is a word which has become inseparable from Bradley. Such are the strange twists and turns of Shakespeare Studies!

According to Cicero, *Prudentia* is valuable in our participation in public life. He writes, "Knowledge and Contemplation of the world of nature would be fable and unfulfilled if no practical action were to flow from it."⁴ This is exactly what happens in *Hamlet* where practical action flows too late to do any public good. Cicero was very clear about our obligations towards individuals which are twofold: We should not harm others and must resist when wrongs are done to others. Macbeth is guilty of harming others and Hamlet standing too much idly when action is required. According to Cicero, injustice is caused by fear, greed and lust for power and fame. Macbeth is guilty of lust for power; the same is the case with Julius Caesar.

One can know about what people of a particular time were thinking by finding out what they were reading. Ruth Kelso points out that the most popular writers during Renaissance were Cicero, Seneca, Plato and Aristotle. Cicero and Seneca devote their writings to show how it is human being's duty to look after their families, friends, and nation criticizing enslavement to the appetites. Cicero's *On Obligations De Officiis* was one of the most published books in England with at least ten translations in circulation. Thomas Cahill in his book *How The Irish*

Saved Civilization show how in Ireland monks were copying classics during dark ages. *De Officiis* is one such title. 700 manuscripts of this book are available in the world which pre dates the invention of printing. N. E. Nelson shows how *De Officiis* became the preeminent moral authority in Europe during medieval ages. *De Officiis* was the first classical text printed by the Germans at a monastery of Suviaco near Rome. When Erasmus published an edition of it in 1501, he writes in the preface “but I hold that religion ought to be derived from the divine scriptures. Concerning civil morals I would rather listen to Cicero.”⁵ Sir Thomas Elyot in his popular book *Governour* (1531) lists three essential texts for bringing up a gentleman. Plato’s *Works*, Aristotle’s *Ethics* and Cicero’s *De Officiis* “these three books be almost sufficient to make a perfect and excellent governour.”⁶ King James refers to his son Henry, *De Officiis* sixteen times in *The Complete Gentleman* (1622). The renaissance educator Henry Peacham implies that *De Officiis* is standard beginning Latin text in Grammar Schools. No wonder Shakespeare knew it so well and was influenced by it.

Seneca left three volumes of letters. Among Latin knowing people which included Shakespeare, his reputation was very high. His works like *De Clementia* (*On Clemenc*) and *De Ira* (on Anger) were already translated during the medieval period. Erasmus and Lipsius published Seneca’s popular editions to show the resemblance between Stoic ideals and Christianity. These were any day available to Shakespeare. In his own time, Montaigne was known as the French Seneca. Arthur Golding, in 1578 translated and published Seneca’s long essay *On Benefyting* whose influence is seen on *The Merchant of Venice* where we have the very famous dialogue uttered by Porita on the quality of mercy. Queen Elizabeth privately circulated her own translations of Seneca’s Epistles *On Adversity*. Thomas Lodge who wrote *Rosalynd*, the source for *As You Like It*, published his English translation of *The Complete works of Seneca* in 1614. Plutarch had written in Greek but was available in Latin translations right from 1509. An English version was published in 1579 by Thomas North. Both Montaigne and Bacon expressed their indebtedness to Plutarch. According to *Encyclopaedia Britannica*,

“the ideal, high, antique virtue and the heroically moral man that became humanist ideal of the renaissance derived from Plutarch’s presentation of characters and openly expressed opinions.”⁷

Seneca’s allegory of giving as three graces in *De Benefyting* influenced many including Shakespeare and the famous Renaissance painter Botticelli’s *Primavera*. Seneca says,”

“There is one for bestowing a benefit, another for receiving and a third for returning it.... Benefit passing in its course from hand to hand returns to the giver.”⁸

Bacon expressed his gratitude to Seneca in dedication to the Essays,

“the word is late but the thing is ancient. For Seneca’s Epistles to Lucillius, one mark them well, are but essays, that is dispersed meditations.”⁹

Thus it is clear that the Renaissance thinkers, artists, poets deeply moved by the roman stoics whose ideals of the man with his impulses under his control and his active engagement with the public life at large, was attempted to be raised as ideal virtues and ways of life.

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