



Enduring the Crisis: Stoic Figures in Shakespearean Tragedies

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Abstract— Stoicism, a Hellenistic philosophy primarily originating in ancient Greece, emphasizes the buildout of virtue, modesty, and self-control as key components of a fulfilling life. Its principles guide one on the path of tranquillity and eternal happiness. Stoic philosophy believes that extraneous occurrences and mundane or sublunary assets are not the key to acquiring true happiness. Instead, stoics believe that the path to true happiness primarily lies in cultivating inner resilience and a disciplined mind. William Shakespeare's works often reflect elements of Stoic philosophy, primarily and particularly underscoring nous, discipline, and virtue crucially and decisively in the face of adversity. Characters in his plays frequently grapple with emotions and fate, illustrating the Stoic belief in accepting things beyond our control. The paper explores elements of stoic philosophy like- the victory of reason over passion, the struggle between action and inaction, the endurance of suffering, and the acceptance of fate in two major tragedies: *Hamlet* and *Julius Caesar*. The paper aims to study the beliefs rooted in stoicism through closely reading the characters and plot.



Keywords— Stoicism, Philosophy, Virtue, Self-control, Nous, Anti-stoic, Shakespeare

Introduction

Stoicism is the school of ancient Greek philosophy founded around the third century BCE by Zeno of Citium, Epictetus, and Chrysippus. Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius was also one of the staunch followers of Stoicism. Christianity and divinity significantly influenced it. Various fields revived the stoic philosophy, including literature, during the fourteenth and seventeenth centuries. Sixteenth-century Renaissance witnessed a rise in Stoicism in the works of Justus Lipsius. The philosophy was the amalgamation of Stoicism and Christianity, known as Neostoicism. Montaigne, Shakespeare, and John Donne, among others, drew inspiration from stoic philosophy.

Stoicism teaches the lessons of virtue, rationality, and self-control to achieve eternal happiness. A man cannot control everything. Fate, death, suffering, and others' actions are not in our authority, so it is better to accept and focus on our actions. Stoicism guides us to relinquish complaining about pain and distress as they are

inevitable. A stoic seeks virtue, is unaffected by emotions, and does not make decisions in haste. According to Stoicism, a wise person follows the rules of natural order and accepts natural events rationally. As we cannot control everything, it is better to take and react wisely. Epictetus teaches, “It is not what happens to you, but how you react to it that matters” (*Enchiridion* 5).

Aristotle, Plato, Seneca, and Cicero were some of the famous Renaissance writers. Cicero and Seneca were the most famous stoics of their time, inspiring Shakespeare to reflect the stoic teachings in some of his characters. Interestingly, not all the heroes of Shakespeare have stoic qualities. Rather, in some plays, minor characters are bestowed with idealistic characteristics.

Lucio, a comic character from *Measure for Measure*, encourages the anxious Isabella to leave behind any self-doubt: “Our doubts are traitors, / And make us lose the good we oft might win / By fearing to attempt” (*Measure for Measure* 1.4.77–79). Lucio's character was employed

for comic relief, but here, with these lines, he acts out as a believer in stoic ideology.

In Henry IV Part II, Feeble remarks lucidly on death: "A man can die but once; we owe God a death" (*Henry IV, Part 2* 3.2.243). Here, he considers the inevitability of death, reflecting his impressive philosophical attitude towards death, a significant tenet of the Stoic school of philosophy.

The Reasoned Voices: Stoic Echoes in *Hamlet*

When one's emotions entirely guide a person, it becomes difficult to conclude the right and the wrong. Shakespeare introduces Hamlet as a brilliant university student whose life is ordinary until he gets the news of his father's death. He felt betrayed to learn about his mother's wedding to his uncle Claudius. This incident left him tormented, and his ability to make decisions was significantly affected. In his first soliloquy, Hamlet expresses his grief: "O, that this too too solid flesh would melt, Thaw, and resolve itself into a dew!" (*Shakespeare Hamlet* 1.2.129–130). His life centres around revenge to the extent that he starts questioning his existence and the uncertainty of life and death, "How weary, stale, flat and unprofitable / Seem to me all the uses of this world!" (*Hamlet* 1.2.133–134). Most of these unfortunate incidents are not in his control; still, he lets the grudges against the culprits overpower him. Even Ophelia, his love, became the victim of his cruelty. He harshly told Ophelia, "If thou dost marry, I'll give thee this plague for thy dowry: be thou as chaste as ice, as pure as snow, thou shalt not escape calumny" (*Shakespeare Hamlet* 3.1.138–140). Hamlet's deeply wounded soul ruined everyone around him. Tragedy befalls him not because he was the victim of circumstances but because he could not deal with the events that were not within his reach.

Horatio, a loyal and dedicated friend of Hamlet, is also a university student. Shakespeare managed to bring stability and calmness through his character in the chaotic episodes of Hamlet's life. Horatio remains Hamlet's companion and becomes his voice of reason, incurring his impulsive behaviour. He warns him against his rash decisions. He warns Hamlet when he irrationally decides to follow the ghost,

What if it tempts you toward the flood, my lord,
Or to the dreadful summit of the cliff
That beetles o'er his base into the sea,
And there assume some other horrible form
Which might deprive your sovereignty of reason
And draw you into madness?" (*Shakespeare Hamlet* 1.4.69–74).

He forewarns Hamlet against the duel with Laertes, which resulted in multiple deaths. Horatio is undoubtedly a stoic character who guides Hamlet through hardships and adversities. Towards the end, describing his beloved friend dying, he, on the verge of emotions, tries to kill himself but is stopped by Hamlet as he wishes Horatio to remain alive. With his serene demeanour and rationality, the character Horatio successfully steers even the most onerous times. Considering the core stoic values, Polonius confidently succeeds in ushering his children through any difficulties they encounter.

While offering fatherly advice to his son to act judiciously, he advises, "Give thy thoughts no tongue, / Nor any unproportioned thought his act. / Be thou familiar, but by no means vulgar" (*Hamlet* 1.3.59–62).

The Struggle between Ambition and Idealism

The philosophy of Stoicism advocates apatheia- a state void of passion. Julius Caesar, a historical figure, is portrayed as an ambitious, valiant and confident ruler. He wears confidence as his second attire. Caesar is so conceited that he compares himself to a northern star, "I am constant as the northern star" (*Julius Caesar* 3.1.60). His towering figure, though, was disapproved by the members of the Senate as they were afraid he might become a tyrant. A stoic never cares for other's perception, but Julius worked on his war commentaries so that he always remains an object of veneration:

*Shall Caesar send a lie?
Have I, in conquest, stretched mine arm so far,
To be afraid to tell graybeards the truth?* (*Shakespeare, Julius Caesar* 70–72).

Most of his policies were politically self-driven. After losing the title of Governor, he crosses the Rubicon, a river, breaking an ancient law where any General was forbidden from entering Italy with his army. He was also responsible for instigating civil war. Stoicism adheres to the service for the greater good, which was not in Caesar's policies. His haughtiness brings forth his downfall; he is remembered as a colossal figure in history, but he could never be among the great tragic heroes of Shakespeare.

One of the significant principles of Stoicism is to dedicate oneself to the common good of society; it disapproves of any selfish act and teaches us to fulfil our duties honestly. Horatio's killing of Julius has no selfish motive or jealousy but a duty towards his nation, "It must be by his death... I know no personal cause to spurn at him, / But for the general." (2.1.10–11). For Brutus, every relationship was secondary to his patriotism. He sacrificed his friendship with Caesar, "It is not that I loved Caesar less, but that I loved Rome more" (*Julius Caesar* 3.2.21);

he faced political turmoil with a firm determination, and though filled with grief, he encountered the news of Portia's demise with controlled emotions, "With meditating that she must die once,/ I have the patience to endure it now", (*Julius Caesar* 4.3.190–191). The said character even steadily accepted the possibility of his demise, as stoics believe in fate. His suicide does not symbolize his pusillanimity because, for him, submitting to captivity was more tormenting than dying. Stoics believe that suicide could be an acceptable act rather than leading a miserable and unbearable life. Therefore, Brutus's unwavering idealism secures him a significant place in history. He is thus undoubtedly the preeminent stoic character.

Cassius, one of the conspirators, persuades Brutus to act and join the conspiracy to kill Caesar, who is guilty of lust for power by declaring, "Men at some time are masters of their fates. The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars, but in ourselves, that we are underlings" (*Julius Caesar* 1.2.139–141). Here, the character of Cassius repudiates the role of destiny and accentuates the rightful choices framed by the people in their lives.

Thus, the present paper concludes that William Shakespeare enlightened the principles of Stoicism through his rich characterization and celebrated quotations. Hamlet is a well-known tragic hero, but his indecisive attitude and off-the-cup actions lead him to his downfall. The Senecan dramatic power, rebelliousness, and vindictive acts Shakespeare documents very well in Hamlet's character; however, it is Horatio, Cornelia, and Polonius who justify the noble qualities of humans through stoic principles. Similarly, Julius Caesar's lust for power led him to fall from grace. Brutus acted wisely, and despite being amongst the conspirators, he reasoned his actions for a noble cause. He efficiently differentiates between what actions are in his control and what are not. Towards the end, he embraced his death, signifying the traits of a true stoic. By incorporating stoic themes in his plays, Shakespeare teaches how chaotic events are handled wisely and that our virtuous and rational actions can change even the most challenging situations.

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