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## “That which Marreth All”: Constancy and Gender in *The Virtuous Octavia*

Yvonne Bruce

IN his study of the influence of French Senecanism on the drama of the Pembroke circle, A. M. Witherspoon effectively dismisses Samuel Brandon's 1598 closet drama, *The Virtuous Octavia*. Calling it “a servile imitation of [Samuel Daniel's] *Cleopatra*”<sup>1</sup> Witherspoon suggests that Brandon chose to dramatize the plight of Octavia because all the good dramatic subjects—namely Antony and Cleopatra—had already been taken by other playwrights. There are compelling reasons for Brandon's choice of Octavia, however—as well as for Daniel's own choice of her as a character in his “Letter from Octavia to Marcus Antonius” and for Fulke Greville's choice of her as a character in “Letter to an Honourable Lady.” The Octavia figure, in classical sources as well as in Renaissance representations, epitomizes the long-suffering and long-virtuous wife of a philandering husband, an epitome of direct consequence for the dedicatees of Brandon's, Daniel's, and Greville's works. But Octavia, chosen ostensibly by these poets to exemplify a feminine ideal of Christian Stoic resolve, serves as more than a classical model for a few literary patrons; she is also used to explore the inadequacies Christian Stoicism's hybrid morality presented to women, as this hybrid was popularly understood to exist in late Elizabethan England.

The treatment of Stoicism in this group of writings centers on “the heroics of constancy,” to use Mary Ellen Lamb's expression.<sup>2</sup> “Constancy” itself is a vexed term, not only because it resists stable definition, as any abstraction does, but also because its meaning is fluid in both the classical and early modern understanding of Stoicism. For example, Guillaume Du Vair, in *La Philosophie Morale des Stoïques*, translated into English as *The Moral Philosophy of the Stoicks* in 1598, the same year Brandon's drama was registered by the Stationers' Company, follows Seneca in expressing the belief that “the good & happines of man consisteth in the right use of reason, and what is that but vertue, which is nothing els but a constant disposition of will.”<sup>3</sup> Seneca describes this “constant disposition” variously, however, as *ratio immutabilis*, *moderatus*, *firmitas*, and *constare*, and he distinguishes his Stoicism from “Certain of our school [who] think that, of all such qualities, a stout

endurance is not desirable.”<sup>4</sup> Joseph Hall, the “English Seneca,” writing shortly after the turn of the seventeenth century, identifies “tranquillity” as one of Stoicism’s chief virtues, but in his lengthy Christian interpretation of it, he calls it variously “constancy,” “controlement,” and “composedness of mind.”<sup>5</sup> Montaigne, who takes issue with Stoic precepts throughout his essays, defines constancy in “Of Repenting” as a “languishing and wavering dance” and questions the supremacy of reason itself in “Of Constancy.”<sup>6</sup> Cicero’s *De Officiis*, the least purely Stoic of his philosophical works but the most popular in the sixteenth century, appearing in nearly twenty translated editions or reprints, is, like Du Vair’s work, an amalgam of ethical instruction that promulgates the cardinal virtues, glossed in translation as wisdom, justice, fortitude, and temperance, but variously defined and described by Cicero. “Constancy” may correspond either to fortitude or to temperance, but both qualities are interpreted similarly, as states of a soul that holds external things in contempt [quarum una in rerum externarum despicientia ponitur] and controls all its own perturbations [omnisque sedatio perturbationum animi].<sup>7</sup>

The greatest advocate of Stoic constancy and the greatest popularizer of Stoic thought in the 1590s—in England and on the Continent—was the Dutch scholar Justus Lipsius. In his *De Constantia*, available in England in 1594 in John Stradling’s translation, *Two Bookes of Constancie*, Lipsius attempts to make Stoic constancy an active Christian quality. *Two Bookes* is cast as a dialogue between the student Lipsius and the constant and virtuous teacher Langius. Lipsius meets Langius as Lipsius is on his way to Vienna, fleeing the civil wars in his “unfortunate and unhappie Belgica.”<sup>8</sup> This provokes, in book 1 of the work, a long lecture from Langius on the fruitlessness of flight, for the civil war that Lipsius seeks to flee is in his mind. Langius advises Lipsius to “seek remedie from Wisdome and Constancie,” and he continues to discuss at length those external things that cannot be controlled and therefore should have no power over the mind, including the “publicke evils” of civil war. Departing sharply from the Stoic advice given in Cicero’s *De Officiis*, Langius exposes the foolishness of patriotic feeling, which is merely the result of popular opinion and custom, and advises Lipsius to submit to divine reason, which alone can distinguish virtue. “The smoake of OPINIONS,” claims Langius, “striveth . . . for the body,” while “Reason striveth for the soule.” Reason, which leads to constancy, springs from the “the mind of the soule,” for “albeit the soule be infected and a little corrupted with the filth of the bodie and contagion of the senses: yet it . . . is not without certaine cleare sparks of the pure fiery nature from whence it proceeded.”<sup>9</sup> Guillaume Du Vair too warns against the “false opinions” of the affections, which can be banished only by “Wisdome . . . the beginning and end of all vertues.” The soul has many “contrarie” parts within it, and those passions “which do

waxe most mutinous and troublesome . . . doe first arise in the appetible or concupiscible parte.<sup>10</sup>

The Christian Stoicism of Lipsius and Du Vair clearly debases the soul with the body, which makes apprehending reason (and thus achieving a “constant disposition”) through the corrupted channels of sense an oppressive task. This Christian Stoic position is one also taken by the Academic Sceptics and, among the Pembroke dramatists, pursued by Greville in his late verse and by Thomas Kyd in *The Spanish Tragedy* (although the idea is too common to Protestant thinking for a shared belief in it to have special significance, it is worth noting that Philip Sidney expresses the same idea in his *Defence of Poesy*). In *Two Bookes of Constancie*, the wise man is advised, in accordance with classical Stoicism, to strive for a kind of Platonic union with universal nature, but the obstacles to this union are well known: not only the inability of the senses to objectively perceive external reality but also the difficulty or even impossibility of the wise man to achieve a state of being that would make him, according to Seneca, different from the gods only in his mortality.<sup>11</sup> Du Vair’s Christian conclusion to *The Moral Philosophie* advocates prayer “in invocation of [God’s] divine favour,” because “our naturall forces can never bee sufficient of themselves to keep us in . . . perfection.”<sup>12</sup> In his introduction to *Heaven Upon Earth*, Joseph Hall envies the heathen Stoics their wisdom in treading the path to tranquillity without the benefit of God’s guidance, yet he pities them their “Mistris Nature,” who has “never performed without much imperfection.”<sup>13</sup> It is Christianity’s unique (but Sceptical) contribution to Stoicism to insist upon this distinction between nature and God and upon the corruption of the soul in its physical prison so that God’s grace and man’s free will in choosing faith might be emphasized.

Another difficulty with defining (and thus achieving) Stoic constancy is that “constancy” is frequently glossed as “patient suffering,” but this is a wholly Christian construction of the word (both Tudor writers and contemporary scholars are guilty of this Christianization). Classical Stoic constancy is not a Job-like passivity but an active—and largely impossible—achievement of the will, one that comes from the *sapiens*’ recognition of the unity of nature, God, and reason. Each is a different name for the same transcendent virtue it is the wise man’s duty to obey and manifest. Thus Epictetus notes of one who is “making progress” toward wisdom that “he has got rid of the will to get, and his will to avoid is directed no longer to what is beyond our power but only to what is in our power and contrary to nature.”<sup>14</sup> In Cicero’s words, “No one who is totally self-reliant, and contains within himself all that he owns, can fail to be completely happy.”<sup>15</sup> Seneca advises that, to live the good life, the mind must achieve “a uniform energy . . . and there will thus be born that unerring reason . . . which, when it has regulated itself and has . . . harmonized all its parts, has attained the highest good . . . The highest

good is the harmony of the soul; for the virtues will be bound to exist where there is agreement and unity.”<sup>16</sup> Justus Lipsius, however, doubts that true constancy can be achieved by the Christian and advocates moderation of the passions rather than the Stoic elimination of them. “[T]he true mother of Constancie is PATIENCE, and lowlinesse of mind, which is *A voluntarie sufferance without grudging of all things whatsoever can happen to, or in a man.*”<sup>17</sup> Lipsian constancy seems to spring from Christian humility, which resembles classical forbearance more closely than it resembles Stoic *apatheia*. Unfortunately, Lipsius’s attempt to redefine constancy and to link Stoic paradox to the mysteries of faith had a negative impact on, among others, James I, who derided Lipsian constancy as that “Stoick insensible stupiditie”<sup>18</sup> which could very well lead, via a deadening of the emotional and moral sense, to indolence and inconstancy. Neither was insensibility confined to the Stoics, as Gilles Montsarrat points out: “Sometimes Christian patience even comes perilously close to the oft-denounced ‘senselessness’ of the Stoics”; Montsarrat cites Gabriel Powell’s condemnation of Job, who “seemed as it were, to take pleasure in his afflictions.”<sup>19</sup> Powell’s skepticism toward the exemplar of Christian patience recalls Montaigne’s toward the exemplar of Stoic constancy, Cato the Younger. Ruminating on Cato’s suicide, Montaigne “cannot believe that [Cato] merely maintained himself in the attitude that the rules of the Stoic sect ordained for him . . . I believe that he felt pleasure and bliss in so noble an action, and that he enjoyed himself more in it than in any other action of this life.”<sup>20</sup> Joseph Hall does not see suffering as salutary either. To achieve “tranquillity,” which is a “steadinesse of the mind,” one needs resolution, and “how can that vessel which is beaten upon, by contrary waves and winds (and tottereth to either part) be said to keep a steady course?”<sup>21</sup> Hall’s use of this image is in contrast to it in Lipsius’s *Two Bookes*: “let showres, thunders, lightnings, and tempestes fall round about thee, thou shalt crie boldlie with a loude voyce, *I lie at rest amid the waves.*”<sup>22</sup>

As the descriptions by Montaigne, Powell, James, and others make vividly clear, “constancy” is subject to a variety of often incompatible interpretations, including, as we have seen, inconstancy. The pose of Stoic indifference had a vogue in Renaissance Europe, for example, particularly on the Continent, much like the vogue for melancholy. The ease with which inconstancy, or at least the indolence and amorality feared by James, could be taken for its opposite led Stoic writers themselves to link Stoic behavior with acting—with all acting’s debauched connotations—and gave the Tudor stage material for its caricatured figure of the Stoic in the stocks. This ambivalence toward Stoic constancy was exacerbated if the constant figure in question was a woman. While Stoicism has conventionally been considered a doctrine of the disenfranchised, like early Christianity—one may have power over one’s reason or faith even if one has no power over anything else—the reputed indif-

ference of the Stoic is a function of his self-sovereignty, hardly a desirable trait in a sixteenth-century woman. Although the writings of the Roman Stoics tend simply to discount women,<sup>23</sup> the social role and behavior of women were of concern to Tudor Christians writing in a time of religious crisis in France and the Netherlands and, of course, under the reign of Elizabeth.

In instructional texts written and translated throughout the sixteenth century, Christian humanists and Protestant reformers shared some goals in their plans to educate women: while the former emphasized facility with languages and the study of classical texts and the latter emphasized biblical exegesis, both kinds of educators saw this study as a means to a pious end. Women's piety, however, especially for the Protestant reformers, was dependent on its adherence to standards of conduct laid out by men.<sup>24</sup> Female constancy as the primary *observable* element of faithfulness or obedience toward God was measured by faithfulness or obedience toward men—usually their husbands. Because women's constancy was judged first by men and only second by God, judgment was plagued by the same weaknesses associated with constancy: first, the appearance of constancy might not convey true constancy, thus women—being naturally duplicitous—were under greater pressure than men to conform to conventional standards of Christian Stoic behavior (modesty, silence, equanimity), or to both “be and seem,” as Elizabeth Cary's motto had it. Second, judgment depended upon the ability of men to apprehend the difference between true and feigned constancy. These weaknesses led to the paradoxical expectations for women's constancy explored in the Octavia characters created by Daniel, Greville, and Brandon.

Of these writers, Samuel Daniel advocates the most classically Stoic constancy, in his epistle “To the Lady Margaret, Countesse of Cumberland.” Daniel knew the countess at first hand, tutoring her daughter the Lady Anne Clifford and dedicating an epistle to her; the countess herself, wife of George Clifford, third Earl of Cumberland, was one of the country-house wives whose misfortunes feature so prominently in verse of the period (the inscription on a Laurence Hilliard portrait of her reads “Constant in the Midst of Inconstancy”). Daniel's epistle, far from advocating a meek submission to the comings and goings of monarchs, tyrants, and other emblems of matrimonial power, praises the individual who “of such a height has built his mind” (line 1) that he looks down upon the “lower Regions of turmoyle” (line 13) with a free eye and a “setled peace” (lines 9, 12); the epistle's narrator assumes that a similar spiritual concord is available to the countess:

This Concord (Madame) of a wel-tun'd minde  
Hath beene so set by that all-working hand  
Of heaven, that though the world hath done his worst,  
To put it out, by discords most unkinde,  
Yet doth it still in perfect union stand

With God and Man, nor ever will be forc't  
From that most sweete accord, but still agree  
Equall in Fortunes inequalitye.

(lines 116–23)<sup>25</sup>

Daniel attributes to the countess a very classical constancy, using a very classical as well as very Elizabethan figure of speech. She is compared to an instrument “wel-tun'd” by the virtuoso “hand / Of heaven.” Wordly discordance cannot mar the tuneful concord achieved between the musician and his instrument. Daniel describes a woman who is worthy of both pity and, in the last two lines, profound admiration: despite her tumultuous existence, her equanimity of mind is so complete that she is equal not only to “Fortunes inequalitye” but, as “Equall *in*” suggests, to “God and Man.”

Daniel's is a superb exhortation, but the epistolary poem is not an ideal form for exploring the many sides of such complex counsel. Drama is a more suitable medium, and the importation of Cleopatra from continental to English letters, via Mary Sidney Herbert's translation of Robert Garnier's *Marcus Antoine*, led to a dramatic reevaluation of the subtler ethical forces at work on and within the character of Octavia, too, who had not been dealt with before in English letters and who had been positioned in classical literature as a foil to Cleopatra's own voluptuousness. Octavia better exemplified the qualities of the ideal Tudor Englishwoman—she valued her marriage, she was devout, she was chauvinistic; she was, in short, an ideal character upon which to work out the conflicts facing the Pembroke poets as they addressed issues of patronage, succession, and religious and civil war and, possibly, as they strove to take English letters in a Sidneian direction.<sup>26</sup> As poets writing about and inspired by a woman, answerable to her as patron, and answerable ultimately to the woman running the nation,<sup>27</sup> Daniel, Greville, and Brandon were forced to confront the scant opportunities for credible virtuous behavior available to women who desired to be ethically autonomous (the ideal of Stoic constancy) and spiritually obligated to no one but God (an assumption of Calvinist theology). These poets found the most usable dramatic models in the classical past because England saw itself mirrored in the Rome of the early empire, because Queen Elizabeth faced—or so it was feared—the same incompatible claims of personal love and national duty that Cleopatra faced, and because England was not forced to confront in the present the civil and religious strife tearing apart France and the Netherlands, although these issues did anticipate England's own religious wars, and England was involved and interested in resolving these foreign disputes to its best advantage.<sup>28</sup> Of these poets, however, only Samuel Brandon seems to have been alert to the dramatic possibilities in and cultural echoes sounded by Octavia's complex ethical and political situation. And despite the ready similarities between Cleopatra and Elizabeth as monarchs torn between public and private loyal-

ties, Octavia offered the politically safer and more virtuous likeness. Ironically, however, all the fictional Octavias use the language of classical Stoicism to lament a specifically Tudor Christian lot.

The tone of Daniel's verse letter from Octavia to Marc Antony (1599) differs significantly from the tone in his letter "To the Lady Margaret," primarily because in the longer former epistle Octavia speaks, bitterly reproaching Antony for his inconstancy and the inconstancy to which she herself is doomed as a woman (stanzas 15 and 16). More interestingly, she also addresses the difficulty of her sex to escape the prison of custom and reputation that is excoriated in Lipsius's *Two Bookes of Constancie*:

I know not how, but wrongfully I know  
Hath undiscerning custome plac'd our kind  
Under desert, and set us farre below  
The reputation to our sexe assign'd:  
Charging our wrong reputed weaknesse, how  
We are unconstant, fickle, false, unkinde:  
And though our life with thousand proofes shewes no,  
Yet since strength saies it, weaknesse must be so.<sup>29</sup>

According to Octavia, Roman men, from their position of political and domestic strength, create external reality. Far from following the evidence of rational nature—as Stoics must—men ignore the "thousand proofes" of women's constancy. Ultimately, Octavia is indicting the very method by which Stoics apprehend reality: those who believe in women's inconstancy are being misled by false impressions, while those who construct "undiscerning" impressions of women according to custom do so in the name of following nature, which is all Octavia herself is claiming to do:

We, in this prison of our selves confin'd,  
Must here shut up with our owne passions live,  
Turn'd in upon us, and denied to find  
The vent of outward meanes that might relieve:  
That they alone must take up all our mind,  
And no room left us, but to thinke and grieve:  
Yet oft our narrowed thoughts looke more direct  
Than your loose wisdomes born with wild neglect.

(stanza 18)

Here Octavia admits that passion is inevitable, and in order for women to achieve true constancy, this passion must be vented out so that external "meanes" can come in—a *natural* equilibrium between the outside and inside, a concordance with nature. She suggests that women have been impris-

oned by men, but that their solitary confinement, as it were, has resulted in the wisdom that comes of long looking inward; her imagery, that is, suggests there are alternatives to Stoic equilibrium as a way to wisdom.

Octavia perceives that Stoic constancy is inadequate to smooth over the messy frailties of human nature. For her, constancy is primarily an action, not a state of mind—this is a crucial distinction between her Stoicism and the classical Stoic ideal. Thus, Octavia blames Antony's infidelities on the general nature of humankind (and on Cleopatra), which makes doing "The lawfull undelightful" (stanza 41), more than on Antony's peculiar weaknesses. Daniel's careful handling of tone suggests that Octavia is aware of her own weaknesses and the lure of the consoling passions for herself: sanctimoniousness, vengeance, self-pity. In stanza 45, for example, Octavia's vow to forgive Antony cannot quite efface, especially in lines 5 and 6, the extremity of the shame she has suffered:

Yet all this [i.e., public opinion] shall not preiudice my Lord,  
If yet he will but make returne at last;  
His sight shall raze out of the sad record  
Of my inrowled grieffe all that is past:  
And I will not so much as once afford  
Place for a thought to thinke I was disgrac'd:  
And pittie shall bring backe againe with me  
Th'offended harts that have forsaken thee.

Unlike Daniel's Octavia, Fulke Greville's unnamed honorable lady does not speak. In Greville's Senecan epistle to her, she is urged to avoid the anti-stoical passions of fear and hope and to escape her corporal prison through a reliance on divine grace and the cultivation of obedience. The epistle phrases obedience less as wifely submission to her husband's tyranny than as self-mastery through the avoidance of the "mists of opinion"<sup>30</sup> and the moderation of her desires (again, a Christian softening of the Stoic goal) to achieve a "naturall Harmony" (273). Greville uses Octavia as the exemplar of this self-mastery. According to Greville, Octavia might have done many things to attempt to win Antony back because compared with Cleopatra "she was as yong, equall in beauty, stronger in honour"; unfortunately, Octavia was also "*ever the same*, which (she knew) was not so pleasing to [Antony], as the same in others": "[T]o be short, [she] was content, when she could not doe the workes of a well-beloved Wife, yet to *doe well, as becomes all excellent Women*. In which course of moderation, shee neither made the World her Judge, nor the Market her Theater, but contented her sweet minde with the triumphs of Patience" (285–86, first set of italics mine).

Greville's sympathy for the Octavia character is pervasive and subtle. He knows she is the victim of Antony's arbitrary preference for Cleopatra and

so offers her his recognition of Antony's inconstancy rather than the mere solace of constancy, "the triumphs of Patience." But Greville's advice to the honorable lady, while extensive and compassionate, is predicated on the lady's inability to effect change or to sustain herself without divine intervention; it is also predicated on the more troubling issue of her sex. Greville takes great pains to demonstrate that women are naturally more constant than men, but he mourns Eve's lapse in the Garden, which means that woman's constant love for men must now, sadly, be reciprocated with the "unconstant proportions of Power, and Will" (260). In other words, Greville's emphasis on self-mastery seems to gesture toward a fully Stoic constancy for the honorable lady, even as it registers the reality of women's inferior social position (273–74), but his final interpretation of Octavia—and of the state natural to women—is one of Christian obedience. This suggests that for Greville both Stoicism and Christianity, universal reason and divine law, share a foundation in male superiority: "Yet Noble Lady! Because you are a Woman, and a Wife; and by the Lawes of both these estates, [you are] in some measure ordain'd to live under meane, and supream authority" (273). In Greville's letter, a far more lengthy and rhetorically complex analysis of the relationship of gender to ethics than Daniel's, the unnatural, monstrous, tyrannical abuses of power displayed by the lady's husband are not general perversions of the man's humanity, but specifically of his natural superiority as a man, a superiority underscored by Greville's frequent references to humankind's original fall from grace and illustrated through the frequent analogy of man to monarch.

Scholars who characterize the advice given or illustrated by the epistles of Daniel and Greville as Stoic (or Neostoic) are missing the complexities the Octavia character brings to the attempted reconciliation of Christianity and Stoicism. Greville urges the honorable lady to consider all the things Octavia might have done, given her position, to save her "from the barren grounds of Duty" (285) but did not—avenge herself on Antony or pursue political power by allying herself with her brother, for example. Daniel's Octavia acknowledges the difficulty of matching her violent passions to her submissive actions. Both epistles, however, rely on a type of "great chain of being" argument to examine Octavia's position which does not quite correspond to Seneca's Stoic maxim that the wise man is ethically superior to God and which is unsympathetic to an Epictetian elevation of the lower classes via the development of self-mastery. Daniel's Octavia, for example, observes that Antony's class superiority demands concomitant moral superiority: "What doth divide the Cottage from the Throne, / If vice shall lay both levell with disgrace?" (stanza 14).

Once Samuel Brandon places Octavia at the center of a drama, the tensions and inconsistencies between Christianity and Stoicism—especially as they manifest themselves for women—are given free play. Brandon's Octavia

shares her dilemma with Daniel's, with Greville's honorable lady, and with the many country-house mistresses to whom these works and others are addressed or dedicated. But Brandon utilizes genre most effectively to illustrate Octavia's moral plight. Without exception, the classical sources for the Octavia story do not exploit the drama of her position in relation to Antony and Cleopatra, and without exception they do not allow Octavia to speak for herself or to initiate action, even when, as Plutarch, Appian, and Dio Cassius do, historians emphasize Octavia's role in averting war between her husband and brother. Brandon, like Greville, ultimately supports a Christian restraint of the passions for Octavia, and advocates her refusal to avenge herself on Antony in the face of reasonable and politically sound advice to the contrary, but we see that none of these virtuous behaviors leads to her peace of mind, which Stoicism is expressly designed to do. Thus by foregrounding Octavia's plight and allowing her to speak for herself, as Daniel's Octavia also does, and by situating her within a context of civil war, as the classical sources do, Brandon ably exploits the implications of, as Lipsius puts it, the civil war of the mind, by pitching Octavia not only between her husband and brother but between Christian virtue and Stoic constancy.

Brandon's drama, to which is appended an exchange of verse letters between Octavia and Antony written in the tone of Daniel's "Letter from Octavia," covers the period between the battle of Tarentum and the deaths of Cleopatra and Antony.<sup>31</sup> It is in some ways an uninspired drama of its type—in its conventional rhetorical flourishes and pentameter filling and its rather plodding march through the events leading to the deaths of the lovers. Senecan closet drama stands or falls on its handling of ideas, however, and it is in this realm that Brandon's drama has been unjustly neglected. There are considerable unexpected touches that deepen interest in Octavia's plight and lay bare the inadequacies of Christian Stoic platitudes, some of them Brandon's invention, some of them odd inclusions from his sources.

I have already mentioned the suitability of the Octavia character for illustrating an ideal English womanhood, an ideal that represents contemporary Christianity and translates a classical model of constancy into New Roman terms. Typically Cleopatra has borne the responsibility of serving as this ideal and its negative, as a warning to fair women (including Queen Elizabeth) and as an example of a woman who has been redeemed by love.<sup>32</sup> Scholarly attention has thus naturally focused itself on the Cleopatra figure because of her political importance to early modern England and because of her inherent fascination. No such fascination attaches to Octavia, although Shakespeare, in his treatment of her in *Antony and Cleopatra*, will draw attention to her marginal status in a quietly enigmatic way that emphasizes her contrast to Cleopatra.

Brandon's drama opens with a monologue by Octavia that begins as a Chaucerian celebration of earth's springtime youth, then segues ironically

into an observation of the illusory nature of human authority: “we, whom reason named . . . Princes of all the rest that nature framed: / Still subject are to sorrowes tyranny; / Slaves to mischance, vassals of fortunes power.”<sup>33</sup> Octavia’s initial description of the natural world, before her bitter introduction of human misery, is of a “golden time” (1), which suggests a paradise neither exclusively pagan nor Christian. More importantly, Octavia’s reference—and the diction of her lament—suggests a political golden time that is undercut by the brazen personal drama of which she is a part. Like the Lipsius character in *Two Bookes of Constance*, Octavia seeks to flee a civil war within her mind, but unlike that character, Octavia is the catalyst for peace in the actual civil war between her husband and brother; in other words, Octavia (like Cleopatra) bears a responsibility for family and country that the Lipsius character does not. Brandon highlights Octavia’s dilemma with inventive literalness in act 1, when Titius arrives to report that Octavia has halted fighting at Tarentum by appearing on the battlefield “*Minerva-like*” (255) between the two armies: “No womans weapon blindes her princely eye; / No womans weakenesse, hir tongues passage staves: / Like one, that did both death, and fate defie” (252–54). Because we see Octavia in her private character and in her public character (via the reporting of action, the typical means of communicating events in Senecan drama), we can appreciate the very deep divide between Octavia’s outward constancy and her inward turmoil—a divide the works of Greville and Daniel, with their limited perspectives, cannot fully articulate.

Brandon provides the drama’s richest irony, however, by linking Octavia with the inspired character Sylvia, “a licentious woman.” Sylvia appears in the second half of act 2 (shortly before Octavia’s oscillating response to her brother’s desire for vengeance on Antony) in conversation with the “Romaine ladies” Iulia and Camilla. As the two latter discuss Antony’s behavior, Sylvia attacks the very notion of virtue with an attack on constancy: “Were I Octavia I would entertaine / His double dealing, with as fine a sleight . . . One nayle you see another will expel, / When nothing else can force the same to moove” (755–56). To Camilla’s remonstrance that she ought to fear the wrath of heaven, Sylvia replies:

The wrath of heaven, why no, the heavens are iust,  
 And Iustice yeeldes a man his due desert:  
 Then sithe I do no iniurie, I trust  
 Not I, but he, for both our faults shall smart.  
 . . . . .  
 But tis most strange to see you go about,  
 To praise the thing that workes all womens fall.  
 Why constancie is that which marreth all  
 A weake concept which cannot wrongs resist,

A chaine it is which bindes our selues in thrall,  
And gives men scope to use us as they list.  
For when they know that you will constant bide,  
Small is their care, how often they do slide.

(783–91)

Her rhetoric is, ironically, similar to Octavia's at the end of act 4, when Octavia admits that Antony will not change and thus trusts her soul to virtue's superior justice. Clearly, the Stoic maxim that virtue is its own reward does not prompt Sylvia's moral perspective; Sylvia, in fact, crafts a positive ethical system out of the very difficulties that confront Daniel's and Brandon's Octavias—achieving constancy among men who undermine its definition by divorcing it from virtue, as Brandon's Antony does, with taunting disdain, in his letter to Octavia:

Heere will I shew, I neither am  
Unconstant, nor unkinde:  
For Cleopatra whiles I live,  
Shall me most constant finde.  
Why am I call'd an Emperour,  
If I should subject be:  
And be compeld to leave the thing,  
Which most delighteth me?

(721–28)

What makes Sylvia so inspired a character is not her stock licentiousness but the way she casts into doubt the assured morality expressed by the play's principals. Sylvia is the most Stoic of them all, refusing to be subject to her passions. In this she resembles Anthony (at least as Anthony imagines himself to be), and in her response to Iulia's remonstrance, Brandon uses Sylvia's similarity to Antony to point up the shaky construction of the gender-class-virtue equation:

Affection, no, I know not such a thought,  
That were a way to make my selfe a slave:  
I hate subiection and will nere be brought,  
What now I give, at others hands to crave.

(865–68)

As Marta Straznicky has pointed out, not only does Sylvia claim the sexual freedom of a man, but she also dares to compare her lot with that of a man of aristocratic birth.<sup>34</sup> Her lengthy musings eventually prompt the spellbound Roman ladies to deride her as unnatural, but Brandon's treatment shifts "unnatural" from Sylvia's licentiousness to the moral and passionate emptiness she and Antony share. Over the course of the play, Sylvia becomes increas-



patience that will enable her to bear what the heavens have assigned to her on the unhappy world's stage, but the remainder of her closing speech, spoken in response to news of Antony and Cleopatra's deaths, belies this patience with a Job-like lamentation: "But from the very instant of my birth, / Uncessant woes my tyred heart have wasted . . . Successive cares with utter ruine threate me; / Griefe is enchain'd with griefe, and woe with woe" (2266–67, 2275–76). The deaths of Antony and Cleopatra seem to lead her close to emotional despair, and her final lamentation is answered only by the Chorus, which can at most promise that her *reputation* for virtue—that "smoake of opinion"—will live on immortally: this is Brandon's ironic reminder that the gulf between human passion and the ideals of divine reason remains unbridgeable.

## Notes

1. *The Influence of Robert Garnier on Elizabethan Drama* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1924), 112.
2. In *Gender and Authorship in the Sidney Circle* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990), 163.
3. Guillaume du Vair, *The Moral Philosophie of the Stoicks*, Englished by Thomas James, ed. Rudolf Kirk (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1951), 55.
4. This "constant disposition" is defined in Epistle 66 in *Ad Lucilium Epistulae Morales*. See also Epistle 67, trans. Richard M. Gummere, Loeb Classical Library, 3 vols. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1943), 2:39. In his *Moralia*, however, Seneca distinguishes between the man who, from having become inured to injury by suffering repeated blows, learns to endure it, and the Stoic man, whose very manner discourages others from injuring him and renders their attempts to do so fruitless. See "De Constantia" in *Moral Essays*, trans. John W. Basore, Loeb Classical Library, 3 vols. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1958, rpt.), 1:55.
5. In *Heaven Upon Earth and Characters of Vertues and Vices*, ed. Rudolf Kirk (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1948), 85–58.
6. "On Repenting," in *The Essayes of Montaigne: John Florio's Translation* (New York: The Modern Library), 725. But note also Montaigne's linking of constancy to obstinacy in "A Defence of Seneca and Plutarke."
7. *De Officiis*, trans. Walter Miller, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1938), 68, 96 (trans. mine).
8. Justus Lipsius, *Two Bookes of Constancie*, Englished by John Stradling, ed. Rudolf Kirk (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press), 72.
9. Lipsius, *Two Bookes*, 76, 84–86, 73, 80, 81, 61, 63, 65.
10. du Vair, *Moral Philosophie*, 61, 63, 65.
11. See Epistle 73 in *Ad Lucilium Epistulae Morales*, 2:111. See also "De Providentia" in *Moral Essays*, 1:7 and 1:45, where Seneca compares the wise man favorably with God, because while the former must gain strength by overcoming

weaknesses and adversities, the latter is “exempt from enduring evil” [ille exa patientiam malorum est, vos supra patientiam].

12. du Vair, *Moral Philosophie*, 129, 128

13. Hall, *Heaven upon Earth*, 85–86.

14. Epictetus, *The Discourses and Manual, Together with Fragments of His Other Writing*, trans. P. E. Matheson, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1916), 2:235 (section 48 of the *Manual*). It is worth noting in this context of Epictetian progress that, according to Jason L. Saunders in his study of Justus Lipsius, nowhere in Lipsius’s writing does Lipsius address the notion of the Stoic “who is in a *state of progress* toward wisdom.” *Justus Lipsius: The Philosophy of Renaissance Stoicism* (New York: Liberal Arts, 1955), 85, n. 6.

15. “Nemo potest non beatissimus esse qui est totus aptus ex sese quique in se uno sua ponit omnia,” in “Paradoxa Stoicorum,” section 17, In *De Oratore*, vol. 2, trans. H. Rackham. Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1948; rpt.), 266, 267.

16. “Hoc modo una efficietur, vis ac potestas concors sibi et ratio illa certa nascetur non dissidens nec haesitans in opinionibus comprehensionibusque nec in persuasione, quae cum se disposiut et partibus suis concensit et, ut ita dicam, concinuit, summum bonum tetigit.” “De Vita Beata,” in *Moral Essays*, 3 vols., trans. John W. Basore. Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1958, rpt.), 2:118–21.

17. Lipsius, *Two Bookes of Constance*, 79 (1.4)

18. *The Basilicon Doran of King James VI*, Scottish Text Society, ed. James Craigie, 2 vols. (Edinburgh: William Blackwood, 1944–1950), 1:156.

19. Gilles Montsarrat, *Light from the Porch: Stoicism and English Renaissance Literature* (Paris: Didier-Érudition, 1984), 93. Powell quotation same page, from *The Resolved Christian, Exhorting to Resolution* (1600), p. 86. Compare Powell’s belief that torture is endurable with Montaigne’s in “A Defence of Seneca and Plutarke,” 646–52.

20. In “Of Crueltie,” in *The Essayes of Montaigne*, 374.

21. Hall, *Heaven Upon Earth*, section 24 (p. 129).

22. Lipsius, 1.6. In Shakespeare’s *Antony and Cleopatra*, Octavia herself is described by Antony with identical imagery. After the marriage between Antony and Octavia, as the latter speaks with her brother, Antony remarks in an aside on his new wife’s (in)ability to mediate between the two men:

Her Tongue will not obey her Heart, nor can  
Her heart inform her Tongue: the Swan’s Down Feather  
That stands upon the Swell at the full of Tide  
And neither way inclines.

Shakespeare’s comparison of Octavia to a feather afloat illustrates in one rhetorical figure the dilemma that emerges from Hall’s and Lipsius’s imagery in combination: a woman who floats movelessly as “swan’s down” upon the surface of the sea, inclining neither way, is identical to one trapped by the equally rough currents besetting her from contrary directions (William Shakespeare, *Antony and Cleopatra* [London: Everyman, 1989], 3.2.47–50). The difference between activity and passivity—and

how these states are defined—points to one of the primary differences between Stoicism and Christianity. Gilles Montsarrat discusses this difference and its influence on Lipsius's *De Constantia*, 52–57.

23. See the introduction to *The Paradise of Woman: Writings by Englishwomen of the Renaissance*, 2nd ed., ed. Betty Travitsky (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), 5–12.

24. See Seneca's "De Constantia": "there is as great a difference between the Stoics and the other schools of philosophy as there is between males and females, since while each set contributes equally to human society, the one class is born to obey, the other to command." In *Moral Essays*, 1:49. See also "Paradoxa Stoicorum," in which Cicero cannot "think a man free who is under the command of a woman, who receives laws from her, and such rules and orders and prohibitions as she thinks fit. . . . For my part I hold that such a fellow deserves to be called not only a slave but a very vile slave." In *De Oratore*, trans. H. Rackham. Loeb Classical Library, vol. 2 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1948, rpt.), 287.

25. Samuel Daniel, *Poems and A Defence of Ryme*, ed. Arthur Colby Sprague (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1930), 111–15.

26. My circumspection in this sentence has to do with the great difficulty of defining an entity called "The Pembroke Circle." I use the phrase throughout my essay partly by scholarly convention because of course there is no conclusive evidence that the poets associated with Mary Sidney ever considered themselves a coterie. The makeup of this poetic circle, and indeed the legitimacy of the assumption that certain poets had enough in common—socially, literarily, or ethically—even to be considered members of a group are contentious issues. The extremes of interpretation are represented by two scholars already cited in this essay. A. M. Witherspoon, in *The Influence of Robert Garnier on Elizabethan Drama*, argues that the poets Mary Sidney, Thomas Kyd, Samuel Daniel, Samuel Brandon, Fulke Greville, William Alexander, and Elizabeth Cary are all linked by the influence of Robert Garnier on their prosody. Witherspoon is not interested in the historically verifiable relations between Sidney and poets who may or may not have enjoyed or sued for her patronage; rather, Witherspoon (clearly a critic of an earlier generation) sees a thematic, dramatic, and prosodic similarity between the poetry of the "circle" and Garnier's adaptations of Senecan drama for moral and political purposes. Mary Ellen Lamb, on the other hand, in "The Myth of the Countess of Pembroke: The Dramatic Circle," has a very different argument: "There was no dramatic circle surrounding the Countess of Pembroke, and the idea of reforming the English stage probably never entered her head" (196). Lamb limits Witherspoon's "circle" to those poets whose work "shows the Countess's certain influence . . . Abraham Fraunce, Samuel Daniel, and perhaps Samuel Brandon." See Witherspoon citation, note 1, and Lamb, "The Myth of the Countess of Pembroke: The Dramatic Circle," *Yearbook of English Studies* 11 (1981): 194–202, esp. 197, 200.

27. As demonstrated, for example, by Greville's destruction of his *Antony and Cleopatra* and by Daniel's defense of his *Philotas*. See *The Tragedy of "Philotas" by Samuel Daniel*, ed. Laurence Michel (New Haven: Archon, 1970), chap. 2, esp. 36–46.

28. See Montsarrat, *Light from the Porch*, 1–2.

29. *The Complete Works in Verse and Prose of Samuel Daniel*, ed. A. B. Grosart, vol. 1 (of 4) (Printed for private circulation, 1885), stanza 15. Further references to this work will appear parenthetically by stanza.

30. *Certain Learned and Elegant Workes* (1633) (Delmar, NY: Scholars' Facsimiles and Reprints, 1990), 269. Further references to this work will appear parenthetically by page number.

31. As Mary Ellen Lamb has noted in "The Myth of the Countess of Pembroke," Ruth Hughey argues that, although Brandon's drama was published in 1598 and Daniel's "Letter from Octavia" in 1599, Brandon was influenced by Daniel's letter, which he saw in manuscript form. Interestingly, however, the earlier version of Daniel's letter, which appears in *The Arundel Harington Manuscript* that Hughey edits, lacks the strong pagan flavor of his final version; the earlier manuscript does not include three stanzas (bemoaning the unequal lot of virtue bestowed by men on women) that distinguish the 1599 version (including stanza 18, quoted on p. 48 of this essay). It remains possible that Daniel's revision was influenced by Brandon's treatment of Octavia.

32. J. Max Patrick, in "The Cleopatra Theme in World Literature up to 1700," discusses Cleopatra's transformation from Augustan-era "threat to 'civilization'" (65) to a comical or baroque figure in late seventeenth-century treatments. Patrick also mentions treatments of Cleopatra that reflect a theme common to the sixteenth century, "heroic death cancels earlier mistakes" (68), a theme Mary Ellen Lamb explores in some detail in *Gender and Authorship in the Sidney Circle* (chapter 3, "The Countess of Pembroke and the Art of Dying"). Patrick, in *The Undoing of Babel: Watson Kirkconnell, the Man and His Work*, ed. J. R. C. Perkin (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1975), 64–76. See also Mary Morrison, "Some Aspects of the Treatment of the Theme of Antony and Cleopatra in Tragedies of the Sixteenth Century," *Journal of European Studies* 4 (1974): 113–25.

33. *The Virtuous Octavia* (1598) (Oxford: Malone Society Reprints, 1909), lines 20–24. Further references to this work will appear parenthetically by line number.

34. "In the choral commentary following this scene [the scene in which Sylvia is chastised by Camilla], Sylvia's monstrous desire is transferred not to Octavia's darker self, as one might expect, but to Antony, who is the only other character in the play to be tagged 'licentious,'" Straznicky, Short title, 121. Both Sylvia and Daniel's Octavia—in their penetrating rhetorical questions and haughty disdain for the double standard—anticipate Salome in Elizabeth Cary's closet drama *Mariam*. Here Salome contemplates the unequal Jewish divorce laws:

If he [Constabarus] to me did beare as Earnest hate,  
As I to him, for him there were an ease,  
A separating bill might free his fate:  
From such a yoke that did so much displease.  
Why should such privilege to man be given?  
Or given to them, why bard from women then?  
Are men then we in greater grace in heaven?  
Or cannot women hate as well as men?  
Ile be the custome-breaker: an beginne  
To show my Sexe the way to freedomes doore.

*Mariam, Fair Queen of Jewry*, ed. A. C. Dunstan and W. W. Greg. Malone Society Reprints (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1914), sig. B3r. Incidentally, even a brief

comparison of Salome's speech with the examples of Octavia's speech in Daniel's "Letter" quoted throughout this essay illustrates the rhetorical similarities that justify A. M. Witherspoon's inclusion of both authors in the Pembroke Circle (in *The Influence of Robert Garnier on Elizabethan Drama*).

35. Mary Ellen Lamb, *Gender and Authorship*, 138.

36. Montsarrat, *Light from the Porch*, 16.