INTERFACE

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Ecophenomenology in Croatian and Modern Greek Poetry: Janko Polić Kamov and Angelos Sikelianos.

A comparative study case

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Résumé

The aim of this study case is to examine the discipline of Ecophenomenology in Janko Polić Kamov's *Ištipana hartija* (*Pinched Paper*) and Angelos Sikelianos' *Lyrikos Vios* (*Lyrical Life*). Maurice Merleau-Ponty's concepts of "flesh of the world" and "chiasm" are the main keys used to interpret the terms of *Nature* and *body* in both Kamov and Sikelianos' poems. Variable *chiasms* are analyzed through different ontological frameworks such as the death zone and landscape sceneries including flora and fauna, based on the individual senses and cognitive state. The *universal flesh* offers a new reading of the death and life zones, perceived as somaesthetical bodies. In this sense, the death and life zones are considered to be eutopias where death advances a symbiotic internship with life and enlightens more its impact on subjective psychology. To sum up, the conception of the *universal flesh* which is an upper hierarchically, constant and dynamic becoming is central in order to enter the aforementioned poets' biocosmic perception.

Keywords: ecophenomenology, Janko Polić Kamov, Angelos Sikelianos, *flesh*, *chiasm*, *somaesthetics* of death zone, more than human world

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Ecophenomenology in Croatian and Modern Greek Poetry: Janko Polić Kamov and Angelos Sikelianos. A comparative study case.

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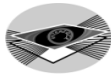*National and Kapodistrian University of Athens*

The phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty studies the subjective embodied experience in the general context of *Nature* and *body*. According to him, *Nature* is perceived not in terms of an inter-embodiment, but as a representation and realistic articulation of human, mind and history (Merleau-Ponty, 1983, p. 3). Moreover, his account on *Nature* and *body* tends to be considered as a holistic remapping of the internship among them and is based on the central concept of *flesh*. Specifically, the perception of the world through senses and human experience is not restricted only in terms of the humans or world, but the *flesh* is the ontological dynamics of their extension as it entails a universal remark. In the Merleau-Ponty's essay entitled "Flesh of the world – Flesh of the Body" (1960), the *universal flesh* is the key axis of decoding the *flesh* of *Nature* and *body* respectively as it is the core, even the question mark of the world's *being* (Merleau -Ponty, 1983, pp. 298-299). Thus, the *universal flesh* is a constant and dynamic stylistics of both *Nature* and *body's flesh* which controls the modalities and functionalities of all lifeforms.

David Abram's account about the concept of *flesh* and its primary source tends to the study of the internship among human and more than human world. Thus, according to Abram, the *flesh's* substance is traced back to the Empedocles' philosophy of the four elements and their ontological structure (Abram, 1997, pp. 65-66). The *flesh* of *Nature* and *body* respectively is structured on different symbiotic *chiasms* in the name of *universal flesh*. In this sense, the *universal flesh* or the '*flesh of the*

world' is an embodied, axiomatic and dynamic stylistics of *being* which verifies its substantial structure. In this sense, we could perceive it as the *anima mundi* (Hilman, 1982, p. 101), however, it is very difficult to define the notion of *flesh* directly, as the *universal* flesh is everywhere and around us constantly, perceived only through senses, mind and embodied experience.

The discipline of Ecophenomenology emerges on the context of Nature's transformations that are perceived through mind and senses per subject (Brown, Toadvine, 2003, pp. xi-xxi, xiii). The embodied experience remaps the ecocritical and phenomenological terrains of epistemology and highlights the complexities of human and more than human relationship. In this sense, *Nature* is perceived mentally as naturata and not as a natural production (naturans).

Here Janko Polić Kamov and Angelos Sikelianos' poetry about *Nature* and *body* is not studied only in terms of variable natural and bodily representations, but is centered on the concepts of *flesh* and *chiasm* within the world. The *universal flesh* shapes an ontological narrative about the perception of the world and its depth which is the primary dimension of the embodied experience, founded in the poets' work.

The *universal flesh*'s depth is a dimension of the world and verifies the dynamic, functional and symbiotic *chiasms* between the organic and inorganic lifeforms that are perceived and interpreted in both life and death zones (Evans and Lawlor, 2000, p. 99). We will see that the ecophenomenological impact on the biocosmic perception of both Kamov and Sikelianos is multi-voiced due to the diverse *chiasms* which are held in space and are operated by the *universal flesh*. In this sense, *ego* and world are the greatest symbiotic *chiasm* in time and space. Hence, the ontological narrative of both poets decodes partial narrations of the variable *chiasm*s that can be found in different environments where the universe is the locus of transitions, transformations, *chiasms* and modalities.

In this study case the selected poems from both Kamov and Sikelianos'

poetry are examples of somaesthetical bodies operated by the *universal flesh* which is a constant *becoming* of interplays in their biospheres. Kamov's work introduces the modernism in Croatian poetry as well as he studies in-detail the notions of freedom, individuality and creativity (Ivanišin, 1975, p. 46). In addition, in Kamov's poetry we could study about the social institutions, ethics, religion and subject's nature towards any limitations. In this sense, Kamov's perception about *Nature* and *body* is not restricted to the traditional dichotomies of the terms, but he focuses on these notions as they are perplexed by keeping their independence in space and time (Milanja u Polić Kamov, 1997, p. 14). Kamov's poem entitled "Kad kroči smrt" ("When death steps") refers to a death zone where the poetic subject calls someone else whose name is not mentioned. The poem opens up with the sunlight which is dazzling: "*Ogromna ko svjetlo sunca*" ("*The sunlight is everywhere*") and the subject highlights the width and depth of the sun as the biggest body among others within the Nature's body: "*nijema kroka, šira, dublja, /ona stupa sa vrhunca*" ("*silent step, wider, deeper, / she steps from the top*").

The poetic subject focuses on the fallen eyelids when his interlocutor is not able to see the dazzling sunlight. Here the human *body* outlines all the intended projections. The subjective knowledge is about the closed eyes and is self-referential as the *body's* image emerges into the *body*'s *flesh*. In addition, the subjective consciousness is being - towards the thing through the intermediary with the *body*'s *flesh*. The sense of a bitter curse is unavoidable when the lived body is at the same time a transcendental one:

> "Pa kad treneš vjeđam crnim,
> kad zjenica nešto žudi,
> da po svijetu leti, ludi-
> jedva smogneš trpku psovku
> i mišjim se mozgom ganeš:
> zapo sam u - mišolovku!"
>
> (Kamov, 2019, p. 19)

("So when you train my eyelids black,

when the ego craves something,
to fly around the world, crazy-
you can barely utter a bitter curse
and you move with your mouse brain:
I am in a mousetrap!").[1]

The black colors correlate with the "*poetic warm rhyme*" ("*ko pjesnič-ka topla rima*") in which a figure is singing a love. Considering that the song is as an artistic / poetic manifestation of love, the poetic *ego* perceives two bodies: its body and a work of art (musical body). Based on these two bodies, there is another one which is the subjective body within the poetic/artistic body (*chiasm* within a *chiasm*).

The artistic representation of the loss transcends the limits of life and a figure moves in an ontological sphere which is the death zone itself:

"Šarali su svi preko nje
i bacali čarne boje
ko pjesnička topla rima
kad nam pjeva ljube svoje"
                                        (Kamov, 2019, p. 19)

("Everyone was scribbling over her
and threw black paint
like a poetic warm rhyme
when he sings to us his loves").

The interplay among good and bad emotions is an expression of *chiasm* found in a donkey's skin. This internship between the emotions and more than human world's body is characterized by charm and insistence. Beauty, charm, sweetness and happiness are variable human emotions, perceived as embodied somaesthetic textualities:

"Svu ljepotu, čar i dragost,
lakokrilu, punu sreću:

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1 The English translations are mine.

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sve su oni povezali
a u kožu magareću”
        (Kamov, 2019, p. 19)

(“All the beauty, charm and sweetness,
light-winged, full of happiness:
they all connected
in the skin of a donkey”).

The reference about some “black letters of lies” (“*I vezahu crna slova / i skladahu riječi laži*”) that are composed and sent by the anonymous crowd (“*i onud su ljudstvo slali*”) decodes the nature of writing which is articulated on vague expressions. The presence of a divine figure is an apocalyptic one and towards the fake promises and faith: “*da si zadnje boštvo traži*” (“*that you are looking for the last deity*”). The female figure’s bodily *flesh*, including the eyelid, finger and skin correlates with the poetic subjective emotional world. The poetic subject raises a question about the figure’s current state: if she is sleeping or she is awaken. The borders among nap and awakeness are flux. In regard with it, the poetic subject concerns about the current state of himself as well:

“I kada već vjeđa pada
i prst je sve tiska niže
i kad zjena prestravljena
nervozasto kožu liže
u cjelovu bolne strasti,

s molitvama plamenijem
i kad duša strahom pita:
o spavam li ili bdijem?”
        (Kamov, 2019, p. 19)

(“And when the eyelid is already falling
and the finger is all the press lower
and when the woman is terrified
nervously licks skin

in the whole of painful passion,
with prayers burning
and when the soul fearfully asks:
oh, am I sleeping or not?”).

The fallen eyelids are a *chiasm* with the colors and beating which describe the tension of the poetic subject's emotional world. The calling of a divine figure is apt to the deep sense and intention of the poetic subject to accept an upper from him power. The whispering of some Greek words reveals that the poetic subject is familiar with the Greek religious tradition in which the goddess has a wide perspective of everything (panopticon). The word "grkijem" could be interpreted as a literary comparative form, in the instrumental case, of the Croatian word of proto-slavic origin "gorak" which means the feeling sour or bitter. Here it is foremost to an eventual homophony as Greece is metaphorical initial place of deity from the religious perspective. The divine figure expresses this inner intention of finding an upper power that will take care and save humanity. Thus, the faith of a divine figure characterizes the impact of the religion on both public and private sphere:

“*iza spalih onih vjeđa*
umišljene redaš boje
i grkijem šaptom tepaš:
boštvo moje, boštvo moje”
<div align="right">(Kamov, 2019, p. 20)</div>

(“behind those fallen eyelids
conceited redash colors
and in a Greek whisper you beat:
my deity, my deity”).

The revelation of the divine figure is perceived in terms of a “*warm love story*” (“*ljubavna topla priča*”). The *chiasm* among love and sadness is not situated only in the emotional world, but plays a pivotal role in the poetic subject's inner world as it describes the variable ripples of his

emotions. The love for a divine figure is at the same time a rapid loss (*chiasm*) which is operated by the *universal flesh*, a multi-voiced *becoming* in space and time:

> "A ono se gubi negdje
> i izmiče brzim letom
> ko ljubavna topla priča
> kad zahiriš nerve sjetom"
> (Kamov, 2019, p. 20)

> ("And it gets lost somewhere
> and eludes fast flight
> like a warm love story
> when you grieve your nerves with sadness").

The reference of youth is another issue which is raised by the poetic subject in order to uncover its existence through time. His intention is to kiss the figure by proposing an alternative option of redemption which will remove any existential uncertainty. A kiss is a sign of a grotesque eroticism which is characterized by the darkness and macabre of the whole scenery:

> "*I mrmoriš trpkom žuči:*
> *kud li ono mladost svene...*
> *i hvataš se njenih skuta*
> *i pružaš joj usne zdene.*
>
> *O zalud ti plamna miso*
> *sa nemoćnim, spalim udom,*
> *i zalud ti pljuckat prošlost*
> *sa osamnim, crnim bludom!*"
> (Kamov, 2019, p. 20))

> ("*And you murmur with bitter bile:*
> *where does that youth go...*
> *and you grab her lap*

and you give her your lips pursed.

Oh, you fiery miso in vain
with a helpless, burnt limb,
and spit on your past in vain
with solitary, black fornication!").

The death zone is a space of tentative emotions and thoughts which are perplexed. The female figure includes all the characteristics of a visionary one which is touchable and at the same time untouchable. The whole scenery is full of *chiasms* and is balanced among charm and gloom of consciousness which intoxicate the poetic subject's emotional world. In this sense, the death zone is a eutopia, a transcendental place of emotional intoxication:

"Ona stupa krokom noći,
kad se gasnu nebni krijesi
i kad žali sveta duša,
što je nisu takli grijesi.

A nad ovom crnom sferom
svjetla lete u obijesti
i u letu čar ih ljudi
i ispija mrkost svijesti"
                (Kamov, 2019, p. 20)

("She steps at night,
when the celestial bonfires are extinguished
and when the holy soul mourns,
that she was not touched by sins.

And over this black sphere
the lights fly in a frenzy
and in flight the charm of them people
and drinks the gloom of consciousness").

The subjective emotional and passionate eruption ("*To je prštaj, prštaj strasti*") is expressed by the crowd's vision of the female and divine figure. Here, the death and mourning correlate with life. According to the poetic subject's statement, "*everything is beautiful, everything is eternal*" ("*Sve je krasno, sve je vječno!*") as all appear in terms of a bodily non-teleology which is based on the norm of subjective psyco-physiological settings. The idea of *Nature* and *body's* finality is a regulative *a priori* concept, concerning with our embodied experience which ascribed to the world (Galen, 1993, p. 20).

Kamov's narrative on embodied experience is constructed in *chiasms* concerning with the real encounters of the world. These mutual internships transform the aesthetical experience into ontological principles of transcending the human life (Galen, 1993, p. 125) and postulates an ultimate truth. This synthesis occurs from mutual reversibility of both senses and the sentient. The subjective experience of *body* as a perpetual unit is synthetic and analytical one and coincides with Kamov's biocosmic perception. In this way, the *universal flesh* is a multi-voiced articulation of *chiasms* that are constant in time and space.

Furthermore, the topic of death is described extensively in another poem entitled "U mrtvoj noći" ("In the dead night"). Here, the poetic subject refers to a "dead night" considered it as a silent one. The *chiasm* of thoughts, buzzing in the air and blazing decodes the poetic subject's turbulent emotional world as it is represented both in the *Nature* and *body's flesh*. The array among *Nature* and cognitive state is centered by another *chiasm* among *Nature* and body's *flesh*. The icy glass, frost strips and their internship with the subjective vision remap the perception about the subjective vision itself. The ice is a natural body and at the same time a metaphorical locus of transparency and clearness:

> "U mrtvoj noći, gdje misli zuje zrakom
> plamisajuć - u noći –
> na ledna stakla, što mraz ih štrapa bijeli
> uperih svoje oči."
>   (Kamov, 2019, p. 23)

("In the dead of night, where thoughts buzz through the air flaming - at night –
on ice panes, which frost strips them white
my eyes are stable.").

Here the death zone is a space where the poetic subject moves and mentions that there are some silent ghosts ("*aveti tišine*") as well. These unseen bodies are invisible but are perceived by the poetic subject. These enigmatic figures have started unexpectedly a circle dance ("*zapodjele su kolo*") and the *chiasm* of life and death is balanced among realism and transcendentalism. The silence and noise of ghosts tend to be considered as vivid acoustic patterns of different lifeforms (*chiasm* of human and more than human world) as the senses are perplexed. The *universal flesh* operates the living and dead tissues in whole so the subject transcends and inserts itself in the question mark of the whole *Being* (*chiasm* of *Nature* and *body*). The adjectives that describe the sky raise an existential query about the *chiasm* of life and death ("*Tihano sve je ko mrtvo, vječno nebo, /bez oblačine, golo*") while the silence corresponds with the *Nature's flesh* which is referred here as a dead, naked and eternal sky without clouds. The representation of a clear, silent and continuous sky is both a public and personal spatiality of wondering about the human existence:

"I gledam, gledam, a aveti tišine
zapodjele su kolo –
Tihano sve je ko mrtvo, vječno nebo,
bez oblačine, golo"
(Kamov, 2019, p. 23)

("And I look, I look, and the ghosts of silence
they dance in a circle-
Everything is silent like a dead, eternal sky,
no clouds, naked").

The subjective vision is a wandering and staring one. The eyes are the

locus of reflection, a space of visual chiasms "*u one slike crne /i motre usne, što utisnute šute*" ("*in those black pictures / and watch the lips, which are imprinted silent*"). The poetic subject is impressed by the blackness and silence which are effective and imply a subjective melancholic state which is considered not only as an emotional one, but in terms of a subjective embodied sense. Here we have to introduce the concept of melancholy which is a human state of an externalization of a particular and individual emotion (Wyllie, 2010, p. 7). Thus, it is a mechanism for the subjectivity's behavior and way of thinking. The subjective melancholy is an inverted *chiasm* of realistic and phenomenological encounters:

"A oči blude i gleđu - dugo gleđu
u one slike crne
i motre usne, što utisnute šute,
sa kojih miso trne

Ušesa kočim za jedan sami trzaj
i sve je nijemo...
O da sam dijete, tek klonuo bih glavom
pa tad – zadrijemo"
                    (Kamov, 2019, p. 23)

("And the eyes wander and stare - they stare for a long time
in those black pictures
and watch the lips, which are imprinted silent,
from which the miso tingles

I brake my ears for a single jerk
and everything is silent ...
Oh, if I were a child, I would just nod
so then - we fall asleep").

Through our ecophenomenological perspective the concept of melancholy is the genetic and functional ontology of a lived realism. The *being* of melancholy is an ontological fact for the embodied experience. Kamov's "new melancholy" is an expression of meanings and realism.

Thus, it is a normative teleology of the *Nature's* body and rhythm. Julia Kristeva's statement about melancholy is about the shaping of a narrative which is analogous to the other's bodily experience. The discourse of the melancholic subject is faded by the Other's one. In regard to it, the discourse is an artistic 'articulation of fades' which proves the dimensions of discourse itself:

> "the melancholic discourse is analogous to the other's skin. The melancholic people are foreign from their maternal language. They lost its meaning. They speak a dead language which is the suicide's shadow and manifest that it is a dead thing"
>
> (Kristeva, 1989, p. 53).

The death zones of the aforementioned poems are eutopias of different lifeforms which are in a constant interplay among each other. In Kamov's perception the life's vibes are represented through diverse *chiasms* which correspond each other by defining a multi-voiced *becoming* that is *universal flesh*. In this sense, the universality of intertwining implies the continuities and discontinuities of all life and non-life patterns in space and time.

In Sikelianos' poem entitled "Μπαίνω στον ασφοδελώνα" ("I am entering into the asphodelus' zone") the poetic subject refers to the multiple representations of *Nature* through some particular acoustic patterns of e.g. the rain, olive's leaves and sparrows career during a rainfall:

> "Αριά η βροχή του λιόφυλλου.
> και το σπουργίτι αργόπεφτε
> σα φύλλον, απλοφτέρουγο,
> μες στη σιωπή, στον κάμπο…"
>
> (Savvidis, 2008, p. 147)

> ("The sparse rainfall drops to the olive's leaves
> and the sparrow falls down slowly
> like a leaf, simple in its wings,
> inside the silence, in the campus…").[2]

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2   The English translation of all passages is mine.

Here the subject is apt to a cosmological link between the universe's architecture, *Nature's* patterns and individual space. These parameters create an internship among the human and world where the subjective *body* is in *chiasm* with soil and light. The latter are elementary substances of *universal flesh's* core and are partial bodies of *flesh* within the universal one:

> "κι απλώθηκα στα χώματα,
> και φάνη μου πώς λάμπω…"
> <div align="right">(Savvidis, 2008, p. 147)</div>

> ("I was expanded in the soil,
> and it seems that I am the light…") .

Following up the light, the waves are divided into two acoustic patterns by highlighting the subjective intensity in order to describe in-detail the whole spatiality in which he is moving on:

> "Μές στο άσπρο φως απλώθηκα,
> στο ανάλαφρο κυμάτισμα
> που ανάερα δεν ηχούσε"
> <div align="right">(Savvidis, 2008, p. 147)</div>

> ("I was expanded through the white light
> on the light ripple
> that does not sound in the air")·

The poetic subject perceives its state of *flesh* in space as the last one is found "*on the light ripple*" and is going higher and higher in order to revive its nature:

> "Το νέο κορμί το ανάλαφρον
> ανέβαινε, ανέβαινε,
> και η σάρκα ετραγουδούσε!"
> <div align="right">(Savvidis, 2008, p. 148)</div>

("The new body is light
and is going higher, is going higher,
and the flesh is singing!").

The spatial acoustic patterns are unseparated from the *body* as it is ontologically perceived in its space. The *flesh's* song, a musical composition, is an intertwining interplay among *ego* and its world, as the song is an artistic product which highlights the bodily encounters within the world. The song displays the mechanisms in which the *being* enters into the world aesthetically. This evolution is structured on the internship among *Nature* and body's *flesh* by setting strong affinities with the *universal flesh*. The death zone is not a space of biological ending and Sikelianos transcends the biological limits and argues that life and death are a great *chiasm* of human *being*.

In Sikelianos' poem entitled "Του ασφόδελου αρμονία" ("Asphodelus' harmony") the poetic subject describes the aforementioned plant. This plant is growing in the death zone's land and its ingredients and functionalities are perceived by the poetic subject who is trying to decode them:

"Εσύ μονάχα, ω βότανο,
ιερό, σμίγεις τη δύναμη
με τη βαθιά αρμονία,
δίκαια στο νου ζυγίζοντας,
με την ιερή μανία"
(Savvidis, 2008, p. 154)

("You are only, oh a botanical plant,
sacred, by uniting the power
with the deep harmony,
you are weighing equally in cognitive sphere,
under the sacred fury").

The *chiasm* among the poetic subject and asphodelus is based on the subjective experience and perceived through sacred and transcendental

perspectives. The asphodelus entails recondite functionalities, morpho-logical and functional dimensions. Here the death zone is a space and at the same time a bio-regional area where plant life tends to frame a textual ecology.

The subjective "mental storm" is resulted due to the inertia and multiple and different *chiasms* that are held in the Nature's *body*. The aspho-delus' harmony is perceived towards the "mental storm" and timidity:

> "Κι όποιος δέ σ' άκουσε, ή βαθιά
> δειλιάζει ή στο τρικύμισμα
> σαλεύουνε τα φρένα του,
> του ασφόδελου αρμονία!"
>
> > (Savvidis, 2008, p. 155)

> ("And anybody who does not hear you or in depth
> he is timid or due to the mental storm
> his mind does not stir,
> here there is an asphodelus' harmony").

Sikelianos' botanical textuality is apt to a dynamic relationship with flora and shapes a botanical narration (Gagliano et al., 2017, p. xvi). The plant's harmonious vibes are perceived in terms of subjective bio-acous-tics. The subjective experience is tuned with the asphodelu's rhythms organically. This concordance is monitored by the *universal flesh* which operates all the lifeforms. The whole poem tends to be considered a praise to the asphodelus, a plant that can be found in death zones and manifests the life as lived being in its sphere.

Kamov and Sikelianos' perception about *Nature* and body is embodied within the *universal flesh*. In both cases, the death zone is an ontological eutopia where the *chiasm* among life and death is constant throughout time and space. The faith in eternal life is an expression of their credo about the continuous cycle of life and death and is not perceived as a discontinuity of these two ontological spheres. The cult of beauty is discarded in favor of a kind of a somaesthetics of death as the death

zones are both aesthetical bodies. The symbiosis among life and death contains immanent elements of the disharmonies and discontinuities which are shaped and appeared coherently.

The poetic discourse raises a question about the existence of phenomenological writing and poetry, considering that the author/artist/creator writes in a phenomenological manner. The texts are conceived within their environments in which they are constructed and structured. The interpretative approach of both Kamov and Sikelianos' poems is not exclusively philosophical as the poetic language is representative of the interplays monitored and caused by the *universal flesh*.

The materiality of *body* is not ascribed to its bodily substance, but it reflects on the embodiment of *ego* in its world frame. In this sense, the embodiment is a phenomenon of rethinking of the world frame as the world is a bodily structured phenomenon itself (Chouraqui, 2021, p. 94). The plasticity of both lyric discourses reflects on the ecophenomenological aspects of *ego* towards the world. In this sense, the natural spatiality is embedded in plasticity and we see that there is a balance among an ethical harmonization of life and the meaning of a world discourse which Ecophenomenology proposes in the respect of the ontology of lifeforms. The only difference that we have to mention is that each poet perceives and conceives the *chiasm* among *Nature* and *body* in a different degree. Kamov seems to adopt a more direct sense of feeling the world around him while Sikelianos' ontological perspective is centered by constant existential anxieties. Instead of using idyllic expressions and linguistic eruptions, Kamov's writing is apt to a more critical manner towards its environment. The emotional eruptions do not exaggerate the *chiasm* of *Nature* and *body* as Kamov places them organically within the general context. Sikelianos is oriented in a more ontological perception of the mechanics of all lifeforms and his descriptions and representations are not workmanlike.

In both cases, the *chiasm* among *Nature* and *body* is structured on multiple 'conflicts' within the *universal flesh's* terrain which seems to 'cage' the *ego* in its spac. Through this condition the poets are towards

the society which appeals to vanish the current movement of modernism (Stanić, 2018, p. 24) in Croatia (Kamov) and logocentrism and irrationality (Sikelianos). However, the *ego* manifests the majesty of *Nature* and *body* in its wholeness.

Kamov's perception of the divine is a means of entering the world in order to survive as life is phenomenologically existent. In contrast, Sikelianos' poetic subjects do not call for emergence by any divine figure or deity but they are in dialogue with an anthropomorphized form of death considering that life and death's *chiasm* is central in their biocosmic perception.

In both Kamov and Sikelianos' poems the *universal flesh* is by nature a self-representation: its presence is perceived in pairs with a motivation towards the world and without any external cause as the world entails all the causalities. Thus, this an -in front - motivation is synonymous of the *universal flesh* as an auto-poetic unity of forms of thought about the unity (*chiasm*) of *Nature* and *body*.

To sum up, the biocosmic perception of both poets is shaped by the textual mechanics of realist representations considering that the *universal flesh* shapes their thoughts, modalities of representations and perspectives upon variable *chiasms* in a plastic manner. In this sense, the biocosmic perception of both poets is the Logos which unfolds the different aspects of *universal flesh* in order to conceive the circularity of life and death.

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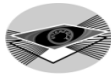
Senecan Tragedy as Response to Stoic Critique

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Abstract

Seneca changes the conflict at the center of tragedy so that the protagonist is no longer caught between internal causes and external causes, the latter of which threaten to overpower or undermine the former. By employing various strategies for deemphasizing external causes, he is able to reframe tragedy around a conflict internal to the subject. Doing so allows him to solve two of the most significant problems the Stoics had identified with poetry, (i) that of the audience's identification with protagonists and (ii) the conflation of virtues and vices. By these means, Seneca is able to produce a drama that agrees more with Stoic sensibilities, or at least, does not too overtly offend them.

Senecan Tragedy as Response to Stoic Critique

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Is there any connection between Seneca the dramatist and Seneca the writer of Stoicizing prose? Seneca's readers generally fall into two categories: there are those who look for some connection between his Stoicism and his drama and those who reject the very notion that Seneca's philosophical Stoicism has any bearing on his career as a dramatist. The latter group find it difficult to believe that Seneca could have seen the tragedies he authored as serving any moral purpose (Dingel, 1974; Segal, 1986; Bartsch, 1994; Boyle, 1997; Schiesaro, 2003).[1] They tend to view Seneca the writer of moralizing prose and Seneca the tragic poet as two different and unconnected sides of the author's personality.

In the opposing camp, some scholars have found in Seneca's tragedies connections, large and small, to his Stoicism,[2] for example, in the way his decidedly Stoic way of conceptualizing the cosmos appears in the plays (Rosenmeyer, 1989), or in the way that different characters are sometimes depicted as representing divergent moral viewpoints, one of which is often Stoic (Lefevere, 1985). Some have found a connection to Seneca's Stoicism in the play's technically precise depiction of the emotions (Nussbaum, 1993; Gill, 1997; Staley, 2010).[3] Others meanwhile, even those generally hostile to the suggestion that Seneca uses his plays to impart a moral lesson, argue that Seneca uses various literary devices to help his audience take a critical distance from and reflect upon the passions depicted onstage (Nussbaum, 1993, p. 137; Schiesaro, 2003,

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1   For an overview of the difficulties scholars face in connecting Seneca's tragedy and his philosophical prose, see Armisen-Marchetti (1989, pp. 347-365).

2   For a summary of attempts dating back a century to connect the plays and prose works, see Pratt (1983, pp. 73-81).

3   Of contemporary scholars, Staley makes perhaps the strongest case that, although Seneca does not view his plays as a form of moral education, or use his plays to teach a didactic "moral lesson" *per se*, he does use them to depict human nature at its worst, and thus to help his audience reflect on the cognitive processes that underly humans' most violent passions (2010, pp. 52-64).

pp. 235-244). Are there however any additional points of contact between Seneca's Stoicism and his tragedies—any that might even point to the existence of a more direct connection than recent scholarship has suggested?

Like Martha Nussbaum, I regard it as essential that we first understand the reasons why Stoics in general would have assumed that poetry and philosophy were like oil and water since, *were* Seneca to have attempted to combine the two, he must at least have done so with the clear intent to meet the challenges involved, or at least with a clear awareness of the challenges (such as for example the need to sacrifice the integrity of one element to accommodate the other). Like Nussbaum, I will therefore try to address the problem of the connection between Seneca's plays and his Stoicism, by first considering some of the reasons for the existence of a conflict between Stoic philosophy and poetry. I go beyond Nussbaum, however, in attempting to probe some of the deeper reasons for an incompatibility between Stoic philosophy and tragic poetry in particular. I will then attempt to discover whether we can find in Seneca's plays any signs that he attempted to overcome the conflict by changing his tragedies to make them more compatible, or at least less incompatible, with Stoic philosophy. My claim is that we do find such signs. Specifically, my claim is that, in its classical form, tragedy centers around a certain type of conflict between the individual and the world that makes tragedy a particularly problematic form of poetry from the Stoic point of view. When we turn to Seneca's plays, we find evidence that he attempts to mitigate this and a related set of problems.

1 Problems With Tragedy

Which aspects of poetry in general, and tragedy in specific, not only make it a poor vehicle for Stoicism, but give it the potential to undermine Stoicism? Here, I am sympathetic to arguments to the effect that tragedy, as a poetic form, is inherently antithetical to Stoic ends, although I reject the further conclusion that Seneca could therefore only have used tragedy for non-Stoic, or anti-Stoic ends. I merely argue Seneca could

not have accepted tragedy *unaltered* in it the form in which he received it, and must therefore have reformed tragedy to make it compatible with, or at least not directly hostile to Stoic ends.

I shall argue that there are three aspects of tragedy in particular, which seem to be both *inherent to tragedy as a poetic form* and *in conflict with Stoicism*. The first two apply to poetry in general and have already been identified by Nussbaum (1993, pp. 123-131). I shall however focus on their application to tragic poetry in specific. The third applies to tragedy in particular and is not mentioned by Nussbaum. Altogether, the three reasons are:

1. the identification of the audience with the actions and affections of a morally flawed protagonist
2. the conflation of virtue and vice in the person of the protagonist
3. the presentation of a conflict between inner and outer forces

To begin with the first, tragedy is essentially focused on portraying characters with whose strong emotions an audience can identify. But since tragedy, by its very nature, presents morally *flawed* characters—albeit ones who are good enough to attract the audience's sympathetic identification—the audience invariably ends up identifying with the perspective and passions of a morally flawed individual such as Medea or Atreus. To this end, a tragedian will even render a morally flawed character in precisely such a manner as to attract the audience's sympathetic identification. Not only this, but the character is rendered so that the audience identifies with the character precisely in virtue of the morally flawed actions and affections with which the play is concerned, actions and affections that are constituted, in specific, by the overappraisal of some externals things and the excessive fear of others (Nussbaum 1993, pp. 123-125).[4] Seneca himself, repeating a refrain already found in the *Republic*,[5] complains that poets depict characters this way,

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4   Nussbaum's reconstruction relies on Plutarch's *How to Study Poetry*. This text repeats several criticisms of poetry also found in Seneca (*Brev. Vit.* 16.5, 26.6, Ep. 115.12, cited in the notes below), before adding, with explicit reference to tragedy, that poetry encourages audiences to identify with characters in respect of their fear of external things such as death, so that they are "infected by their passion" (17c-d). Nussbaum argues that the view Plutarch espouses is Stoic. This can be seen when Plutarch's text is read in conjunction with the aforementioned passages in Seneca, as well as some in Strabo (I.2.3).

5   In Books II-III we find Socrates complaining that Achilles is portrayed as attaching significance

and thus encourage the audience to evaluate external things in the same manner as their characters.[6]

A second criticism Stoics make of poetry in general concerns the way in which it presents characters in whom virtue and vice coexist alongside one another. Plutarch writes as follows:

> "The imitation that does not completely disregard the truth brings along with it (*sunkepherei*) signs of both vice and virtue that have been mixed in the actions (*kakias kai aretēs semeia memeigmena tais praxesin*), as in the case of Homer, who emphatically says goodbye to the Stoics, who judge that nothing base can attach to virtue, nor anything good to vice (*mēte ti phaulon aretēi proseinai mēte kakiai xrēston axiousin*), but, in all ways, the ignorant person errs in everything, and in turn man of culture is right in everything (*panta d' au katorthoun ton asteion*)."
>
> (*Quomodo adul.* 25b8-25c4)

If Plutarch is any guide, the Stoics may have feared that unsuspecting listeners could end up imitating Achilles' vices as well as his virtues, especially if they were to follow the twists and turns in the plot of the *Iliad* as Achilles switches back and forth from acting virtuously, to acting viciously, to acting virtuously again (26b9-e1).[7] Likewise, Stoics may have objected to the depiction of generally vicious people as having some virtues and sometimes acting in virtuous ways, since this could blind audiences to the vices lurking underneath an apparently virtuous exterior.[8] All epic and dramatic poetry should have this prob-

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to Patroclus' death in a way that a truly virtuous person would not (386d9-387a2). These false beliefs (*doxai*) about externals are then internalized by the audience and "taken into the soul" (377b7). See further Nussbaum (1993, pp. 104-106).

6   For example, he complains that stories about Jupiter's indiscretions lead people to believe that immoderate desire is normal, even good. Stories of the underworld and the fear it inspires encourage the audience to fear death (*Brev. Vit.* 16.5, 26.6).

7   Plutarch thinks this danger can be averted if young audiences are warned from an early age that, as in poetry so in life, everyone has their virtues and their vices (26a1-b5). The Stoics may have agreed with Plutarch that audiences should be taught to sharply distinguish between Achilles' virtuous and vicious deeds, although, presumably, they must have insisted on the unity of virtue as a point of doctrine, and rejected the idea that *true* virtue can ever be accompanied by vice.

8   Plutarch mentions that it is a feature of tragedies, in particular, that they take vicious characters,

lem of course since narrating the actions of a perfectly good person would lack interest for audiences (25d2-e1), as Plato already observed.[9] But given that tragedy is usually thought to require a noble but flawed hero, the combination of virtue and vice in single person seems especially essential to the tragic form, and hence, this problem seems endemic to tragedy in particular.

The Stoics seem to have found nothing to criticize in poetry depicting vice *per se*, as long as it presented vicious characters acting in vicious ways and then suffering the consequences, for example, overvaluing externals and then undergoing *pathē*. Epictetus even praises the potential pedagogical value of tragedy for this reason.[10] So the Stoics' complaint about drama, if they had one, was not simply that it put vice onstage. Rather, their complaint about drama was that many plays presented neither virtue *nor* vice—but a confused combination of the two.

It becomes even clearer why this problem would have applied to tragedy in particular if we consider the virtue Stoics insisted most emphatically was incompatible with vice. I am speaking of course of the quality of *constantia*, which the Stoics said belonged only to the virtuous person, the vicious person having no part in it.[11] *Constantia*, 'constancy' or 'consistency,' is the ability to single-mindedly pursue one's ends without wavering or retreating, especially under variable circumstances. Incidentally, *constantia* and its opposite, *inconstantia*, happen to be the

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such as Phaedra, in the *Hippolytus*, and place beautiful speeches in their mouths so that "plausible and artful words are framed to accompany disreputable and knavish actions" (28a1).

9   As Nussbaum points out, this criticism of poetry can also be traced back to the *Republic*. There, Socrates bemoans the way in which poetry takes heroes and gods, who are supposed to be virtuous, and presents them as behaving in vicious ways, for example, lacking self-sufficiency and over-esteeming external goods in ways that produce passions (1993, p. 125).

10   Epictetus is almost certainly following Chrysippus when he points out that tragedies show how vicious people are made to suffer because of their attachment to external things. He asks, "but what ese are tragedies but the suffering of people who have been wonderstruck by external things, displayed in the usual metre" (*Dis*. I.4.30)?

11   "The worthless man, however…does everything badly…easily changing his mind and in the grip of regret over every matter (*eumetaptôs ôn kai par' ekasta metameleiai sunechomenos*: Stob. *Ecl*. 11i15, 1999, 79, cf. 11m5, 11m19). The same is implicit in the Stoic definition of virtue as "a disposition and faculty of the governing principle of the soul, brought into being by reason, or rather, reason itself consistent, firm, and unwavering (*homologoumenon kai bebaion kai ametaptôn to hupotithentai*: *Vir Mor*. 441c: *L.S*. 61B, trans. Long and Sedley). For similar definitions of virtue, see: Stob. *Ecl*. 5b1; *De Fin*. V.xxiii.66.

virtues and vices that figure most prominently in tragedy. For one thing, tragedy seems to demand a peculiar combination of *constantia* and *inconstantia* because it seems to have to present characters, on the one hand, as undergoing a change in the face of unexpected events, and thus as *inconstant*, but also, at the same time, as proceeding with a certain determination down a path that eventually leads to misfortune, and thus as *constant*. It must even present characters as *constant* to a fault. Indeed, one is struck by the way in which, in classical tragedy, *constantia*, or something like it, appears almost as *the* tragic flaw par excellence, since*,* it is the tragic hero's hubristic insistence on a certain course of action that exacerbates his or her other failings and provides an occasion for his or her downfall. The playwright typically underlines this aspect of the drama by showing the protagonist continuing down a collision course with disaster, despite being given various opportunities (in the form of bad omens and warnings) to slow down or change course. Of course, this fact makes it appear that tragedy must necessarily portray *constantia*, if not as itself a vice,[12] then at least as coexisting alongside, and compatible with vices. In short, the Stoics may have thought tragedy mixed virtue and vice by presenting a virtue like *constantia* as compatible with vice and its effects—things which, on a Stoic account, it excludes.

We have now detailed the first two problems with tragedy. In the section to follow I address the third problem with tragedy, which I shall subsequently argue is the underlying cause of the other two.

2 Tragic Conflict

The third problem with tragedy is not explicitly mentioned by Nussbaum and is only referred to obliquely in surviving sources, perhaps because, more than the others, it is particular to tragedy as opposed

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12   Plutarch, in *How to Study Poetry*, complains at length that poets mislead their listeners by employing words in a way that is incompatible with the strict philosophic sense of these terms. He singles out 'virtue' and 'happiness' as words that are particularly subject to abuse. Assuming he follows the Stoics here, they may have complained that, in poetry, characters are often presented as having "virtue" when, in the strict Stoic sense of the term, they are not virtuous (24c9-d2).

to other poetic forms.[13] Nevertheless, I will argue that, whether it was explicitly named by early Stoics or not, it would have appeared to any Stoic who considered the issue, not only as a significant problem in its own right, but as the root cause underlying the other two problems.

 This third problem with tragedy has to do with the way this poetic form, in particular, is defined by a conflict between two opposing forces. Call this the problem of 'tragic conflict.' For expedience's sake, we can reduce this conflict to the opposition between a set of internal motivations that drive the individual *from within* and a set of external forces that compel the individual *from without*: the internal and external sources of action. However, this distinction also embraces a wider set of related oppositions, which Jean-Pierre Vernant variously identifies as including those between personal agency and external necessity, reason and compulsion, individual and cosmos, the human and the divine (1988b, p. 43). For example, in Sophocles' *Oedipus*, Oedipus' repeated attempts to assert himself as a rational individual come into direct conflict with a series of fated events beyond his power to control.

In Euripides' *Medea*, to take another example, the clash between Medea's love for Jason, which is central to who she is as a person, on the one hand, and the event of his betrayal, on the other, produces the reaction in Medea that moves the dramatic action forward and sets in motion the series of events that lead to catastrophe. This conflict is essential to provoking the reaction of fear and pity that defines tragedy. Martha Nussbaum describes this nicely in explaining the audience's response to *Medea*:

> The ordinary spectator of Medea's tragedy would find something deeply painful in the way in which great and loyal love,

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13   However, in Plutarch, we do find a persistent concern that poetry characterizes the gods as malevolent objects of fear, who are opposed to human purposes (16d1). Moreover, Epictetus does say that tragedy should be read, not in order to reinforce an existing tendency on our part to see ourselves as unhappy victims of fate, but instead, with the opposite end in view: to reconcile ourselves to fate. One should read poetry with the aim "to remove from his own life mournings and lamentations, and such expressions as 'omoi' and 'talas egō,' and misfortune and ill fortune, and to learn the meaning of death, exile, prison, hemlock—so he can say in prison, O dear Crito, if this is what pleases the gods, so be it…" (*Dis*. I.4.23).

betrayed, leads on to disaster; for they would think of such a love as a fine thing, and it would seem horrible that the interaction between love and the world would produce such a morally disturbing result. (1993, p. 143)

As in most poetry, the main character is caught between these two forces, one internal and one external. However, in tragedy, the clash between the two produces horrifying results. Pity and fear are thus aroused in the spectator precisely because the spectator is made aware of the possibility that they may so clash.

The example of *Medea* is invoked here, not because the play should be taken as a paradigmatic example of classical tragedy, but rather because it shows how even a fairly unconventional tragedy such as *Medea* can still be viewed as roughly adhering to this general model. At first sight of course, Medea appears to violate this pattern, since the murder of her children seems to be the result of a freely chosen, even gratuitous decision on her part. Yet Euripides takes care to emphasize that Medea's actions are motivated by her sense of justice in response to a betrayal (26, 160, 165, 578, 580, 582, 1352-53). In several scholars' opinion, she, like many tragic heroes, is constrained by a code of honor to avenge this betrayal, even when revenge comes at a significant personal cost, and indeed, even when it conflicts directly with her deeply felt wishes and intentions (Bongie 1977, pp. 29-32; Dihle, 1977, pp. 24-16; Foley, 1989, pp. 65-66). Hence, it is not impossible to interpret Medea as driven to revenge by external forces that also overcome the opposed internal forces within her (whether these internal forces are identified with her motherly instincts or her rationality).

Of course, if it were felt that this sort of conflict between internal and external forces could be avoided, or that external forces could be brought under the individual's control, tragedy would lack something of its tragic quality. What must give tragedy its distinctly "tragic" quality then, must be the tragic drama's depiction of an external force as both (*i*.) exceeding the power of the individual to fully control and (*ii*.) ultimately winning out over the inner force, or forces, to which it is

opposed. To use Vernant's example, in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* for instance, Agamemnon's better judgment, not to mention his fatherly affections, are overcome by forces that are larger than himself, such as fate, the gods, and the larger sweep of events that have brought him to the present juncture (1988a, pp. 71-77). Here, the protagonist's partial or complete ignorance of the way in which he or she is moved by external forces—Sophocles' *Oedipus* is the most obvious example—only further strengthens the impression that he or she is driven by external forces that exceed the ability of the human individual to comprehend, much less control. And this explains why it is also a common—but by no means necessary—feature of tragedy that the protagonist sometimes discovers only too late that he or she has fallen victim to external forces (1988b, p. 45).

Against this admittedly sweeping characterization of tragedy, it might be argued—and this point will later prove important for an assessment of how greatly Senecan tragedy differs from the classical version—that the protagonist is only temporarily caught between internal and external forces, and that, in many cases, these two forces eventually combine to determine which course of action the protagonist eventually takes. This is because, as Vernant points out, the protagonist is never pushed in one direction without the opposing force becoming an accomplice to the act. For example, Agamemnon eventually decides to sacrifice his daughter not simply because he is fated by external events to do so, but also because his own military ambitions and human vanity conspire with larger forces to push him in that direction (1988a, pp. 72-73). Hence the theory of "double motivation," which claims that tragic action is determined simultaneously by two causes, an internal and external cause (Lesky, 1966).[14] Nonetheless, although the tragic hero is never a completely innocent victim of external forces, it remains true that these external forces must prove decisive in such a way that one can at least imagine a future scenario in which the protagonist looks back on his or her actions and doubts whether he or she would have acted the in same way were it not for the influence of external forces.

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14   Foley argues for example that the audience cannot help but see reflected in Medea's words, "the overdetermination of Medea's thoughts, emotions, and actions" (1989, p.72).

Why would this feature of tragedy have elicited Stoic criticism? Simply put, because tragedy implies that (*a.*) the individual should fear external forces because they are in fundamental conflict with the individual's deepest, and most sincerely felt aims and intentions, and that (*b.*) such a "clash" is one the individual has no power to avoid.

Although the matter cannot be discussed at length here, it should be noted that the worldview presented in tragedy is in fundamental conflict with the Stoics' own. In the Stoics' view, the ordinary state of affairs is one in which internal and external sources of action *cooperate* to produce the same result. In the Stoic view, for example, once a person receives a sufficiently clear and strong external impression from the world and assents to it, this in combination with the individual's inner nature should result in an impulse to act.[15] The result is that the same action is proscribed by *both* external *and* internal causes. Here, there is no conflict between internal and external to speak of.[16] Indeed, there is a serious question whether tragedy is even *intelligible* from a Stoic point of view. If as Vernant stresses, tragedy's existence presupposes the ability to distinguish between internal and external as distinct and opposed forces (1988b, pp. 46-47, 1988a, pp. 81-82), and if the Stoics were not even able to treat external and internal as distinct forces capable of independent causal operation, then a serious question arises as to whether they were capable of conceiving a conflict between internal and external, much less of conceiving external forces as hostile or overpowering.

The Stoics *were* capable of course, of recognizing the existence of a certain kind of conflict between the individual and the world, but in their view, such a conflict was always caused *by the individual*. This was what they termed a *pathos*. A *pathos* occurred because of precipitous assent to an unclear impression, and resulted in a violent emotional reaction, on the part of the individual, to an external state of affairs.[17]

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15   On the one hand, the object that gives rise to a *katalêptic* impression acts upon the subject as a necessary cause, causing, even "compelling," the subject to assent to the impression (Sextus, *Math*. 7.257, cf. *Math*. 7.252; *Acad*. II.xxi.38, *Acad*. II.xxiv.77, II.vi.18, II.xxi.38). On the other hand, the individual's action is determined by his or her human nature (Alex. *Fat*. 189.20-2; 182.32-183.2).

16   Nor, as several scholars have pointed out, is there a conflict between rational autonomy and external compulsion, for which reason the Stoics' position has been labeled compatibilist (Salles, 2005, pp. 61-63; Bobzien, 1998, p. 387-394).

17   Galen, *P.H.P* 4.3.2-5: *L.S.* 64K.

It could never be blamed on a hostile external power. Hence the problem with tragedy, from the Stoics' point of view, would have been that it presented conflicts between the individual and the world as beyond one's power to prevent, therefore as uncontrollable events to be feared.

We have just outlined some of the problems that Seneca would possibly have confronted if he were to write tragedies as a Stoic. He may have reasoned to all these conclusions on his own or, more likely, encountered some in written form in Stoic texts.[18] Whatever the case, we can see that scholars who doubt Seneca the playwright has any connection to Seneca the moralist have some justification for supposing that Seneca must have realized that tragedy and Stoicism were incompatible and put aside his Stoicism to write his tragedies. This is all the more plausible when Seneca's own plays seem designed to permit the audience to revel in the base passions of his protagonists, the bloodshed and gore to which they lead—to no apparent moral end. The villain goes unpunished; the victim cries out for retribution in vain. What possible connection, one might ask, could these plays have with Stoicism?

In what follows, I will argue that it is not necessary to take the simple position that Seneca's Stoicism is either compatible or incompatible with tragedy, that his tragedies do or do not reflect his Stoicism. Beyond this simple dichotomy, a third alternative is possible: Seneca transforms tragedy to better accommodate Stoicism while retaining what is essential to tragedy insofar as is possible.

3 Tragedy Transformed

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18   The chances that Seneca read Stoic critiques of poetry are high, given the sheer number of texts by Stoics on the subject: Diogenes Laertius lists, among others, Zeno's *Peri Poiētikēs Akroseōs* (Diog. VII.4), Cleanthes' *Peri Tou Poiētou* (VII.173), and Chrysippus' *Peri Poiēmatōn* and *Peri Tou Pōs Dei Poiēmaton Akouein* (VII.200). Unfortunately, however, we find no explicit evidence in Seneca's prose works that he was aware of any specifically Stoic criticisms of poetry, although we do find evidence that he was broadly aware of Platonic criticisms of poetry (Staley, 2010, p. 7). Nussbaum has argued that these Platonic criticisms were formative for the Stoics (Nussbaum, 1993, pp. 104-106, see above). Seneca was aware, for example, of the idea that art was mimesis, an imitatio naturae (Ep. 65.3, 8). He also knew that tragic verses could stir the wrong passions (Ep. 115.12.14). As Staley has argued, Seneca would have been keenly aware of the ancient quarrel between philosophy and poetry and would not have written tragedies "without at least addressing in his own mind this 'ancient quarrel'" (Staley, 2101, p. 14).

Since Martha Nussbaum has already shown how Seneca's Stoic predecessors, faced with poetry they saw as having disadvantages, generally proposed adopting a reformed poetry that retained the advantages of poetry without the disadvantages, it is reasonable to suppose that Seneca adopted a similar strategy (1993, p. 141).

Unfortunately, there is less scholarly consensus about precisely *how* Stoics, including Seneca, proposed to reform poetry. Here I diverge from Nussbaum. Nussbaum suggests that the simplest means the Stoics would have had of eliminating the audience's identification with the protagonist—she focuses almost exclusively on this problem—would have simply been to make the protagonist morally repugnant; she argues that it is for this reason that Seneca makes his characters as off-putting as possible (1993, p. 148, *contra* Schiesaro 2003, p. 244).[19] Nussbaum's conjecture has proved influential for interpretations that stress the many ways in which Seneca purportedly constructs his plays to promote disinterested reflection and "critical spectatorship" (Schiesaro 2004, p. 244).[20] However, despite its attraction, this sort of interpretation finds little textual support in surviving texts like Plutarch's *How to Study Poetry*, which rather instruct *audience members* how to keep their guard up against poetry and its inevitably anti-philosophic content, not *the poet* how to defang poetry in order to protect the audience from its baleful influence. Taken by itself, it also has the drawback of focusing almost exclusively on the problem of identification, as it presumes Seneca only attempted to solve *this* problem, and what's more, did so only in a relatively superficial manner, neglecting the possibility that he attempted to address this problem by addressing a deeper structural problem within the tragic form.

However, now that we have a better understanding of the problems with tragedy, which explain why tragedy and philosophy are difficult to com-

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19   Nussbaum seems to think the Stoics adopted a suggestion from Plato's *Republic*: putting speeches that contain false beliefs in the mouths of lowly or risible characters, or women (387e9-388a1; 1993, p. 107). Schiesaro by contrast is not persuaded that we are meant to be repelled by Medea and Atreus (2003, p. 244).

20   Both Schiesaro and Nussbaum find it useful to compare Seneca with Brecht in this respect (2003, pp. 243-251). Schiesaro however is more hesitant about concluding on this basis that Seneca's plays have a moral purpose (2003, p. 62, p. 259).

bine, we can see *how* Seneca may have confronted these challenges. I shall begin by showing how Seneca addresses the larger problem of tragic conflict, which has been relatively ignored in existing scholarship, in order to show how, by resolving this, the third problem I have discussed above, he resolves the other two problems. I will therefore focus, first, on this problem, which I will argue, is the larger of the three and underlies the other two, and then suggest some ways in which, having solved this problem, Seneca solved the other two. Broadly, my argument shall be that, by removing external necessitating causes for the protagonist's action, Seneca eliminates the conflict between inner and outer forces at the heart of the tragic form. In general, I will proceed by examining Seneca's *Thyestes*, after which I will attempt to draw some conclusions that may be extended to Seneca's plays more broadly.

4 Thyestes

At first glance, the *Thyestes* could be mistaken for a typical tragedy in classical style and Thyestes a typical protagonist.[21] Like any tragic hero, Thyestes has a tragic flaw and bears no small part of the responsibility for his downfall. However, I shall argue that in Thyestes' case, this tragic flaw bears the bulk of the responsibility for his downfall and external causes almost none.

Thyestes' tragic flaw is of course his lust for power, which has already driven him to seduce his brother's wife and, together with her, plot to unseat his brother, Atreus, from the throne. This immoderate lust for power now provides Atreus a pretext for punishing Thyestes (220-241). First, we hear from Atreus how Thyestes' lust for power has brought them to the current pass and made the use of extreme force necessary:

> And what could be cruel enough to vanquish him? Does he lie

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21   *Contra* Schiesaro, I shall argue that Thyestes is the main protagonist. Schiesaro argues that "we do not fear with Thyestes but plot with Atreus." Much of Schiesaro's interpretation however relies on the claim that Atreus' viewpoint and machinations are foregrounded for the audience when the same could equally be said of Thyestes' (2003, p. 3). Nonetheless, my interpretation does not exclude that Atreus is also a protagonist, or that the play has two tragic figures.

downcast? Can he abide moderation in success, or inaction in failure? (*numquid secundis patitur in rebus modum, fessis quietum?*) I know the man's intractable nature: he cannot be bent, but he can be broken. So, before he strengthens himself or marshals his powers, he must be attacked first, lest he attack me at rest. (196-203)[22]

According to Atreus, Thyestes has already proved himself to be a dangerous threat who must be met by preemptive force so that Thyestes already bears a significant share of the responsibility for the punishment he is about to receive. Second, Thyestes bears a large share of the responsibility for what he is about to suffer insofar as his immoderate lust for power becomes the means by which he is led into danger. This character flaw is harnessed by Atreus in the service of his revenge plot when he tricks Thyestes into returning to the palace at Argos, luring him into his trap (*laqueus*: 287) with the false promise that, once he has returned, the two brothers will share the throne together (290-294). Here, Atreus accurately predicts that Thyestes will do anything, including risk his own life, to satisfy his desire for power:

> But as it is, he desires my kingdom. In this desire (*hac spe*) he will confront Jove's threat of thunderbolt; in this desire (*hac spe*) he will face the threats of swelling flood, or enter the treacherous straits of the Libyan Syrtes; in this desire (*hac spe*) he will do what he thinks the greatest evil: see his brother. (290-294).

Hence, to the question of which weapon he will choose to attack Thyestes, he replies "Thyestes himself" (*Ipso Thyeste*: 258). In short, like all tragic figures, Thyestes' flaws make him vulnerable and induce him to take steps that will lead to his own downfall. But, in addition, Thyestes seems more responsible than most tragic heroes for creating the very circumstances under which he is tempted to make a fatal mistake.

Thyestes is, like many tragic figures, pulled in two directions at once and forced to make a choice: Thyestes must choose either to retreat to

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22   Unless otherwise noted, all translations are taken from Fitch, 2004.

the safety and obscurity of the countryside to live out his days in peace with his children by his side or to return to Argos and claim the throne at significant risk to himself and to them (404-470). But is this a classic conflict between inner and outer forces? We might say that Thyestes' desire for power, which exerts and inexorable pull on him, is in conflict with his heartfelt intention to live the quiet life and, straining a bit, that, while the latter is internal to Thyestes as an individual, the former is provoked by external causes. However, although tempting, Atreus' offer does not really exert any outside pressure on Thyestes to which he is not already subject, such that he can be said to act under the compulsion of an external force. So we might instead say that the conflict is better construed as one between two *internal* forces: Thyestes' desire for the quiet life and his desire for power. Indeed, I shall argue this is probably the better interpretation.

Thyestes of course chooses to return and claim power. But unlike in classical tragedy, the decision Thyestes makes is not presented in such a way as to appear determined by external forces. It is not simply that Thyestes' lust for power makes him susceptible to larger forces: external causes such as Atreus' offer play a comparatively minor role and Thyestes' lust for power is instead presented as *the* force that bears primary responsibility. At first, it may seem to differ only slightly whether we say Thyestes is primarily impelled by lust for power or primarily compelled by external forces, to which his ambitions make him susceptible, but as Seneca is aware, the implications of leaning toward one interpretation or the other are significant, as will be explained further below.

The fact that we are meant to interpret Thyestes' actions in the former way is indicated by the striking absence of any reference to exculpating external causes for Thyestes' behavior. (Hence mine is an argument from silence.) But it is also foreshadowed by a long choral ode that informs us in advance that the bloody spectacle we are about to witness could have been avoided were it not for Thyestes' desire for power. It announces that, if kings' hearts were free of desire, hostilities would cease and there would be "no need of calvary, no need of weapons…

no need to flatten cities" (381-387). The audience's impression that it is Thyestes' desire that leads him onward and that is responsible for what is about to happen is reinforced when the next scene opens on Thyestes walking toward Argos as he daydreams about returning home to adoring crowds (409-411).

It could be argued of course that Thyestes is pressed in this direction by his son's entreaties (429-433), since he himself claims to act on his children's urging (*ego vos sequor, non duco*: 489). But this interpretation must be excluded because Thyestes' son only offers him gentle reassurances that he can trust Atreus, which importantly, Thyestes knows better than to believe (*errat hic aliquis dolus*: 473-486). Ultimately, we must reason by process of elimination that it is Thyestes' lust for power that leads him to suppress his doubts, overlook the evident dangers that await him, and press ahead.

Notably, Thyestes does not describe himself, nor is he described by others as being swept along by the course of events as he proceeds towards Argos, as we would expect if we were intended to view Thyestes as a victim of circumstance. On the contrary, Thyestes actually describes himself as swimming *against* the current:

> My intention is to proceed, but my body is weak-kneed and faltering, and I am pulled away from the goal I struggle towards. Just so a ship urged on by oar and sail, is carried back by the tide resisting oar and sail (*sic concitatam remige et velo ratem, aestus resistens remigi et velo refert*: 436-439)

It cannot be understated how dramatically this passage contrasts with the way a typical tragic hero such as Agamemnon is described as blown *with* the wind, or in one translation, as "blowing together with the blast of fortune" (*tuchaisi sumpneon*: 187). It signals that Thyestes is not to be understood as powerlessly swept along by stronger forces but, if anything, as opposing *them*. It is also significant that Thyestes goes *slowly* and *reluctantly* to his doom (*moveo nolentem gradum*: 418-420). This contrasts markedly with the way in which the great figures of classical

tragedy race hastily down a given path (Kirkland, 2014). It again shows that his actions are undertaken in apparent defiance of opposing forces; they are in no way *overdetermined* by external and internal forces, the combined force of which usually send a protagonist rushing down the path to certain doom.[23]

In general, Seneca eliminates the possibility of seeing Thyestes' actions as determined any number of external causes: Atreus' false promises are not particularly persuasive to him (418-420), nor, although Atreus' actions are arguably undertaken under the influence of supernatural forces (1-121),[24] is there any indication that Thyestes *himself* is subject to them. Nor is Thyestes spurred by the fear of poverty; in fact, the safety and security of the simple life appeals to him (445-470). Indeed, the causal factors that explain Thyestes' actions are so few that one must conclude that, not only are his actions *not* over-determined, but in fact, he takes a path *opposite* to the one he seems more than sufficiently necessitated by external causes to take.

What we have here then is an apparently a classic tragic scenario in which, at a crossroads, the protagonist takes a course of action that turns out to be the wrong one and that he will later come to regret. For

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23   Unfortunately, it is impossible to know how significant Seneca's innovation is, or how greatly his version differed from other staged adaptations of the Atreus myth. We know of eight Greek tragedians and six Roman ones who adapted the myth for the stage. But besides Seneca's *Thyestes*, the only one that survives in partial form is Accius' *Atreus* (Tarrant, 1985, pp. 40-43).

24   For reasons of length, I do not address Atreus' role in the tragedy here. It should be noted however, that Atreus' apparent subjection to the Furies could make him a more traditional tragic figure (on the role of the prologue and the Fury's appearance there, see below). Nonetheless, even this interpretation should probably be resisted in favor of an interpretation that would make Atreus similar to Thyestes, as I have described him here. On this reading, the two brothers can be understood as mirror images of one another: First, Atreus, like Thyestes, is in control of himself the entire time. Second, he ignores his own misgivings about what he is about to do, especially in two instances in which he chides his spirit not to retreat (283, 324). Third, so far from arising from the forces of nature or the gods' influence, Atreus' actions are emphatically and repeatedly described as contrary to the natural order and repellant to the gods (260-266, 703, 790-884). In this case as well, human arrogance is not just accomplice to a deed instigated by external or divine forces, as in most tragedies, but the driving force that impels the protagonist to act in defiance of the gods. Note that Atreus wants his power to rival the gods (713, 911, 885-888). In general, Seneca not only minimizes reference to any instigating cause that might exculpate Atreus, but repeatedly emphasizes that his actions go far beyond what antecedent causes might explain: they are unnatural (315) and exceed normal limits (267). Atreus himself gives no indication that his action, no matter how extreme, ever reaches the point of being sufficient or proportionate to its causes, at first saying, "This is good, this is ample, this is enough for now, even for me," then asking, "But why should it be enough?" Up to the closing act he insists, "even this is too little for me" (1052).

Thyestes, this moment comes when he finds himself resting on purple cloth and drinking from a gold cup, but now, at the terrible cost of feasting on his children's flesh (908-913). However, something of the truly tragic character of *this* play is lost since we no longer feel the individual has suffered at the hands of larger forces for which he was no match. Instead, the individual takes a decision at the behest of his own desires, which crucially, are not themselves determined by external causes, or not *sufficiently* determined by external causes. What, after all, could explain or justify Thyestes' immoderate desire for power?

5 From One Solution, Three

I would now like to show that, by solving one problem endemic to tragedy, Seneca also solves another set of problems, and that this is because the former problem is the cause of the others. It should now be clear that Seneca solves the chief problem—the problem of tragic conflict—by removing any reference to external causes that might make Thyestes' actions appear to result from external forces that compel him to act counter to his own wishes and intentions, after which point, we are left to infer that the bulk of the responsibility for Thyestes' actions lies with an internal cause, namely, Thyestes' immoderate desire.

This change made, the negative consequences of tragic conflict are avoided: first, there is no reason to fear one's actions will be determined by the result of a contest between internal and external forces, in which external forces are always the stronger party. Second, there is no reason to fear that external forces are in fundamental conflict with the individual's happiness. Thyestes indeed suffers terribly, but not because the world is fundamentally hostile to human objectives or human happiness. Third, and relatedly, there is no reason to fear that the individual's most deeply held aims and intentions will inevitably be thwarted or meet resistance from external forces, as Thyestes might easily have avoided this predicament.

Immediately, we can see how this simple change would have addressed

the further problem of audience identification discussed above. From the start of the play, Thyestes already has a desire for power that is disproportionate and well beyond what his circumstances could warrant or justify. So already, the audience is not likely to recognize the specific internal causes to which the protagonist is subject as ones that would be capable of moving *them*. More importantly, Thyestes subsequent actions, including his return to Argos, do not seem to be fully explained or justified by *external* causes. Identification requires that we find characters' actions to be reasonable responses to the external conditions that precede them. But since Thyestes' actions do not have external causes, or do not have causes that are sufficient to justify them, a possible doubt can be raised in the audience's mind as to whether the same causes would really produce the same reaction *in themselves*, and whether they—the audience—would really do the same thing in Thyestes' place.

Moreover, we typically we find it easy to identify with the internal struggle, and hence, the resulting actions, of a character whose initial internal motivations we find legitimate, and/or who we feel to be an unfortunate victim of circumstance. A typical tragic figure meets both these qualifications because he or she begins with legitimate motivations (for love or family loyalty) that suddenly come into conflict with demands (for justice or fealty) elicited in reaction to overwhelming external forces. Thyestes meets neither qualification: his internal conflict arises, on the one hand, because of an internal motivation that is flawed from the outset, and, on the other hand, not because of overwhelming external forces, but rather, because of an inborn and eminently reasonable desire for safety and security—further raising the question why he doesn't simply relinquish his initial motivation. Hence, we have no particular sympathy for his dilemma. (In this way, Seneca can be described as substituting a conflict of self-*versus*-self for a conflict of individual-*versus*-world, as I will explain below.) In brief, the reason we do not identify with Thyestes' internal conflict is that, whereas a typical tragic hero's internal struggle is thrust upon him or her, Thyestes' is self-made.

So overall, we feel no particular sympathy for (*i.*) Thyestes' initial desire

for power, nor any (*ii.*) when he undergoes an internal conflict because this desire conflicts with another, more legitimate desire—nor even, finally, (*iii.*) when, because of this desire, he undertakes a course of action that leads his legitimate desire for a quiet family life to be horribly dashed.

It could of course be argued that we *do* sympathize with Thyestes for his loss, and it is true that Seneca has not completely removed our identification with Thyestes *qua* grieving father. Certainly, the grotesque details of his children's death compounds our empathy for Thyestes—producing a fellow-feeling that may not be incompatible with Stoic *apatheia*.[25] Our reaction to this scene is also accompanied by an awareness that Thyestes' crime is comparatively small in relation to the disproportionately severe "punishment" it receives. But this is the extent of our identification. Importantly, we do not identify with Thyestes *qua* someone who has a legitimate attachment, which is cruelly wrested away by external forces beyond his control, since we still think Thyestes is more than a little responsible for what has happened: *we do not identify with him* qua *victim of a cruel fate.* Arguably, this already takes the sting out of our emotional response, or, at least, it does nothing to encourage any identification with Thyestes' *pathē*.[26] Indeed, provided we have already learned to accept the loss of a child stoically, the play will not provoke in us a more intense reaction to Thyestes' loss than we would have to another parent's. Most importantly, however, *we do not identify with Thyestes* qua *vicious person*: we do not identify with him with respect to the judgments and passions of his that lead to his eventual undoing.

Thus, by removing the intimation that Thyestes is subject to external forces, and solving the problem of tragic conflict, Seneca, in the process, largely solves the problem of the audience's identification with

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25   As several scholars have pointed out, it would not necessarily contradict Stoic practice to feel momentary empathy for characters in a play. Such a reaction need not rise to the level of a passion as long as it is not accompanied by a false judgement. Indeed, Seneca describes the reactions of fear (*timor*) and sadness (*tistitia*) we feel while watching drama as *propatheiai* that fall short of full-blown passions (*De Ira* 2.2-5).

26   It should be noted that, whereas classical tragedy depends on encouraging the audience to share the protagonist's attachments in order to produce its dramatic effect—since the audience will only feel the protagonist is the unfortunate victim of a hostile fate if they share the same attachments—,Seneca, having already abandoned this aim, has nothing to gain by encouraging such attachments.

vicious characters. In retrospect, moreover, we can see why tragedies, as they are written during the poetic form's golden age, almost inevitably compel audiences to identify with vicious protagonists: first, they present a character's situation and subsequent actions as the product of a clash between seemingly reasonable internal intentions and uncontrollable external realities, and second, they present a character's actions as the product of external causes, indeed, as *over*-determined by a combination of external and internal forces, in light of which the character's actions not only seem to be explained, but justified. In brief, if plays depict conflicts of this kind then they necessarily *depict the protagonist's actions as reasonable and relatable responses to conflicts of this kind.*

Almost inevitably, once Seneca has removed any present danger of external causes that are at complete odds with the individual, no serious danger of conflict between internal and external forces still remains: inner and outer causes no longer threaten to drive the individual down divergent and contradictory paths of action. Once this conflict disappears from Seneca's plays, the plot necessarily revolves around the only conflict that still remains to be portrayed: the one kind of conflict that can still arise because it is precisely a conflict "of one's own making." It is the kind of conflict that, according to Stoicism, is created when the individual *him or herself* acts, without being compelled by external causes,[27] contrary to his or her better judgment such that he or she ends up at variance with him- or herself.[28]

This fact, that Seneca substitutes the conflict self-*versus*-self for the conflict individual-*versus*-world has already been observed obliquely. Christopher Gill, for example, focusing on madness in specific, observes that, when Senecan characters are driven to madness, their madness differs from that of characters in Greek tragedies. The latter exhibit a madness, which, he argues, following recent scholarship (Padel, 1992), is divinely inspired or otherwise induced by external causes.[29]

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27 The Stoics stress that *pathē* are voluntary rather than non-voluntary movements of the soul (*Tusc.* 4.60. *Acad.* 1.5.38; *Noct. Att.* 19.1, *LS* 65Y).

28 Plut. *Vir Mor.* 446f-447a: *LS* 65G: *SVF* III.459.

29 Gill also observes that, whereas Greek characters sometimes address themselves, for example in *Medea* and *Phaedra*, one self does not refer to the other, as in Senecan drama, as "mad." He thus concludes that although these two plays contain scenes of internal conflict very similar to what we find

Gill argues that the madness Senecan characters exhibit is by contrast primarily akratic. However, Gill does not offer an explanation for Seneca's decision to portray his characters' passions in this distinctly Roman, as opposed to Greek, style except to say that this "psychologized and moralized" (1997, p. 219) depiction of the passions may be due to a general Roman tendency to follow the Stoics in associating all vice with this sort of madness (1997, p. 232, n. 74), or may have appealed to Seneca as means of showing passion's innerworkings (1997, p. 235). We, however, have just seen the real reason for this innovation.

Let us now turn to the second problem with tragedy, its confusion of virtues and vices, especially the conflation of *constantia* with vices it technically excludes. In classical tragedy, the fact that a character's actions appear necessitated by external causes adds to the impression that the character has already decided on a course of action and will not be moved from it—in itself, an admirable constancy. But, because the decision to undertake this course of action also seems to arise, in part, from a character flaw such as pride or ambition, this kind of constancy also appears to be partly vicious. Hence what results is a kind of *vicious constancy*. However, because a Senecan character is not necessitated by external causes in the same way, the audience is aware that the path he or she takes is one the character *might otherwise avoid were it not for a given vice*. We are thus aware that the character could very well have avoided this path, and *might still* abandon this course of action as soon as this vice is corrected. This impression is only further strengthened as, during the course of the play, the character *in fact* begins to vacillate or to think better of his or her decision. Hence, the little constancy the character might at first seem to display quickly appears as merely temporary, and therefore *not as genuine constancy at all*. In this way, vacillation serves the function of underscoring the fact that the character's constancy is not genuine *because it arises from vice*. It is important to emphasize this feature of Senecan drama, since many scholars have been taken in by the appearance of constancy in some of Seneca's more determined characters, Atreus and Medea being two such examples,

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in Seneca's plays, "neither of the Greek tragic examples is quite parallel to the analogous Senecan cases" (Gill, 1997, pp. 220-221).

despite clear evidence that they are conflicted about their decisions.[30] This has driven many scholars to suppose that Seneca deliberately presents the Stoics' favorite virtue as, at worst, a vice and, at best, a neutral tool that can be used with equal adeptness in moral or immoral hands by suggesting the possible use of "Stoic consistency for non-Stoic ends" (Brower, 1971, pp. 164; also Miles, 1996, pp. 58-61; Star, 2006, pp. 209). However, these sorts of interpretations fail to take into account the extent to which Seneca focuses almost entirely on *self-conflict*, and thus, on characters who are precisely *inconstant*. He thus makes the vice of inconstancy the tragic flaw par excellence—one that is always accompanied by other vices.

Seneca ensures that Thyestes' internal conflict is not foisted upon him but self-made, thus ensuring that his *inconstantia* is a symptom and indicator of other vices. For it is precisely Thyestes' flaws that cause him to vacillate in the first place. Hence, at the very least, Seneca is able to show that inconsistency is *a vice that is caused by and accompanied by other vices*, rather than suggest, as classical tragedy seems to, that consistency is a virtue often accompanied by vices.

We can thus see why, if any Stoic considered the matter, they would be led to the conclusion that the way tragedies present conflict constitutes a serious structural problem for this particular poetic form, and not only this, but a problem that underlies all the other problems associated with this poetic art. The fact that Seneca considers the matter in this light is evident in his plays. Overall then, this leads to the conclusion that there is an important and heretofore unrecognized respect in which Seneca tailors his tragedies to Stoic sensibilities.

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30   Atreus asks himself, "Why paralyzed (*quid stupes*)? At long last, rouse your heart and begin (*tandem incipe animosque sume*: *Thyst.* 241-242)," and then again, "Why take fright again my spirit, and slacken before the event? Come, you must be bold (*anime, quid rursus times at ante rem subsidis? audendum est, age*: 283-284)." Medea vacillates at length from 925 to 944 and again at 988. Clytemnestra's vacillation in Act Two of *Agamemnon* is legend (111, 137-140, 239).

6 Other Senecan Tragedies

I would now like to turn to some of Seneca's other tragedies in order to show that they display some of the same patterns as the *Thyestes*. Here, a few caveats are in order. First, I do not intend to imply that Seneca has a single strategy for "Stoicizing" tragedy that he uniformly applies to all his plays. Seneca's plays are too diverse to be described as the output of a single formula and Seneca probably experimented with different devices throughout his career. However, it can be shown that Seneca draws from a repertoire of similar strategies in writing his plays. It is not likely to be a mere coincidence that they all make his plays less objectionable from the perspective of Stoicism.

Secondly, although my own treatment of these texts must necessarily be brief and selective, given considerations of space, nevertheless, a fuller confirmation of my hypothesis would require a detailed analysis of each play mentioned here, as well as others I have not mentioned. Such detailed analyses would have the advantage both of bringing to light the various devices that Seneca employs in "Stoicizing" tragedy and also elucidating the way in which Seneca's use of these devices changes and develops over the various stages of his career.

I spoke above of the way that Seneca removes from the *Thyestes* any suggestion that the protagonists' actions are determined by external forces. If my hypothesis is correct, then this should also be the case in other plays. To be sure, this is certainly not a strategy Seneca adopts universally.[31] However, in many cases, he does remove the gods, in particular, as a cause of the protagonist's actions. For example, whereas in Euripides' *Hippolytus*, Aphrodite appears at the outset to announce that she will punish Hippolytus for failing to revere her, no such scene occurs in Seneca's *Phaedra*. Instead, Phaedra herself actually tries, but *fails*, to blame the gods for her fit of passion (185-200), and is pointedly

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31   One obvious exception is *Hercules Furens*. As in Euripides' version, Juno is directly responsible for driving Hercules mad. This play used to be considered an early work, in part because Seneca seems to intentionally present Hercules in a quite different light in *Hercules On Oeta*, but modern stenography places the play among a middle group of works (Marshall, 2014, pp. 38). Nonetheless, it can be, and has been argued that the extreme violence of Hercules' madness is not "caused externally as in Euripides" (Pratt, 1983, pp. 119).

rebuffed by the nurse, who points out that people have invented such stories just to justify their own passions (195).

If my hypothesis is correct, then fate should also not be cited as an exculpating cause for the actions of protagonists. And indeed, in *Phaedra*, the nurse insists that Phaedra's passion *not* be understood as fated, but rather as a product of her character: "This outrage is far worse than monstrous, for the monstrous is attributable to fate, but crime to character" (*nam monstram fato, moribus scelera imputes*: 144-145). Not only this, Seneca presents Phaedra's chosen course of action not as caused by, but as *defying* fate and the gods. So whereas Euripides' Phaedra acts at the instigation of a deity, Seneca's acts in rebellion against the gods, of whose defiance she is warned:

> Who will let such a deed lie unconcealed? Parents care is shrewd. But suppose we conceal such an outrage by cunning and deceit: what of him who pours his light on the world, your mother's father? What of him who shakes the heavens, brandishing the bolt from Etna in his glittering hand, procreator of the gods? Do you suppose that it can be managed that between these all-seeing grandfathers you will not be seen? (145- 158)

In contrast to classical tragic figures, Senecan characters are described more often in passages like these as acting *against*, rather than at the behest of the gods.[32] Moreover, they are also described as acting *against* rather than at the behest of fate. For example, Euripides' Medea claims to be acting with the gods' approval and assistance (160, 674, 1013), a claim which is confirmed at the play's end with the appearance of the chariot of the sun. Indeed, even at the precise moment she kills her children, she is described as "the victim of an evil fate" (1275). Seneca's Medea meanwhile, is portrayed as rebelling *against* fate when she is told to submit to it. She stubbornly refuses, asserting, "Fortune can take away my wealth, but not my spirit" (174-177).

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32   Another example can be found in Seneca's *Trojan Women*, when, according to Agamemnon, Pyrrhus tempts the gods by neglecting "what actions the conquerors may rightly take" (257). He tests his luck when he should be "fearing overly favorable gods" (262).

Although Seneca's preferred strategy seems to be to eliminate all reference to fate, he does not entirely omit all discussion of fate, nor would this be to his advantage, since a tragedy must apparently contain some reference to forces that exceed the individual's comprehension and control if it is to maintain its distinctly tragic "feel." How Seneca deals with fate, when he *does* invoke it, can be seen in his *Agamemnon*, perhaps the Senecan play that contains the greatest number of allusions to fate.

In the prologue to *Agamemnon*, we again encounter Thyestes, the now deceased father of the play's chief villain, Aegisthus. Thyestes also appears as an unsavory character in this play, appearing from beyond the grave to cheer on his son's attempt to avenge him. Recalling his role in setting the stage for the events that are about to unfold, Thyestes at first takes responsibility for being the chief catalyst for his family's most recent series of misfortunes, but, at the same time, he casts himself as a victim of Fortuna (28), even claiming that he was compelled by fate (*coacta fatis*: 33) to sleep with his own daughter, since an oracle made him an uncertain promise (*fides incerta*: 38) that, if he did so, the son he fathered would avenge him.[33] However, we should not accept Thyestes' attempts to deflect responsibility for his role in the present drama uncritically. For one thing, the unfolding series of events to which Thyestes is now claiming to be a passive spectator are ones that he is, even now, boasting of (25) and cheering on (44).[34] Thus, to the extent that Seneca wants us to accept the notion that something like "fate" is at work here, he seems to want us to understand this "fate," as much as is possible, as something that each generation has an active hand—not just a passive role—in perpetuating for the next. The same could be said of the role of fate in the prologue to *Thyestes*: where fate *is* mentioned, it appears as little as possible as a force external to and hostile to human beings and as much as possible as a product of human action which is in

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33   It is significant that the oracle is referred to as uncertain. The overall effect of the prologue is to make Thyestes an excited spectator to the main action of the play, who nervously waits to see if the action unfolds in the way an unreliable oracle said it would—not to put a prophecy in Thyestes' mouth.

34   He seems to describe the action his son is now about to undertake as if it were what he was destined for: "The reason for your birth has come, Aegisthus," he says (48). But we, the audience, understand that, Aegisthus is "destined for" murder primarily in the sense that killing Agamemnon is the purpose for which Aegisthus' father created him. Thyestes thus seems to bear a significant share of the responsibility for what is about to happen.

human control.[35] In general then, Seneca seems to preserve reference to "fate" when it can be understood as something that human beings make for themselves—something over which, he implies, they can always reassert control.

How then does Seneca deal with Cassandra's prophecy of Agamemnon's murder, which plays such a central role in the traditional Agamemnon myth and contributes so dramatically to the "fate-like" atmosphere of Aeschylus's play? In Aeschylus's version of the play, Cassandra sees the past as well as the future, lingering on Thyestes' crimes and how they have given birth to an endless succession of avenging crimes (1091-1104, 1183-1201,1215-1241). Seneca, however, does not present Cassandra, as Aeschylus does, as having a vision of the past, present, and future crimes of the family, as if co-fated and linked in inevitable succession. Instead, he cleverly has Cassandra perceive a certain foreboding resemblance between the days leading up to Troy's fall and the demise of its king, Priam, and the present moment in Argos, as if she saw Argos superimposed over a picture of Troy (726-733, 792-796). In this way, as well as through a series of visions (of the underworld, then of a woman with a knife, and then a lioness and a hyena), Cassandra predicts Agamemnon's death—*without* implying that the basis for this prediction is a chain of necessitating causes that make the crime inevitable.[36]

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35   The prologue to Thyestes focuses on the curse that hangs over the house, which might be said to make Atreus' actions "fated." But whereas other tragedians might use this curse to lay some blame at the feet of external causes, Seneca emphasizes that the chain of causes ultimately leads back to Atreus' grandfather, Tantalus, and his original crime: an offence he committed in wantonness and rebellion against the gods. Seneca appears to introduce an innovation, making it part of Tantalus' punishment— "Has something worse been devised than thirst parched amidst water..?"(4)—that he must, on the instructions of a fury, set his descendants house in disorder. Thus, the audience is reminded that what is about to transpire has not been caused by greater forces that are opaque to human beings, but rather, is something for which human actors are ultimately responsible. Another alternative is to read the opening scene symbolically, as Fitch suggests: "as he [Tantalus] rises from the underworld, so desire rises from the irrational depths of the mind." However, Fitch does not exclude that Act One also indicates a causal relationship between Tantalus' actions and his grandsons' (Fitch, 2004, p. 222).

36   In Aeschylus' version, in fact, the events to come are foretold in more than a few ways: a curse has been put on Agamemnon (457), and the chorus awaits bad news as soon as nightfall (459). Not only are the gods not the constant presence they are in Aeschylus' Agamemnon, gone from Seneca's version are the countless references to certain and inescapable events we find in Aeschylus's version, starting with the decade-old prophecy, with which the Aeschylean version opens, that Iphegenia will be killed and her slaughter will be avenged by "a fearsome, guileful keeper of the house, a Wrath that remembers and will avenge a child" (155).

We also do not find the same emphasis on necessity and necessitating causes as in Aeschylus' version, as when Aeschylus has the chorus say Zeus teaches human beings a lesson by force (biaos: 182), and describes Agamemnon as putting on "the yokestrap of necessity" (anankas edu lepadnon: 218). By contrast, while Seneca's play creates the atmospheric effect of an event on the horizon toward which present circumstances are tending, it does all this without directly attributing the events of the play to necessitating causes.

Another strategy that Seneca uses in *Agamemnon*, as well as in many other plays,[37] is to use choral odes to suggest that the events depicted in the play are "fated" only in a very specific and limited sense, for example:

> Though weapons cease and treacheries cease,
> greatness sinks by its very weight,
> good fortune is a burden that crushes itself. (87-89)

The ode continues:

> …the lofty hills are struck by lightning,
> larger physiques are prone to disease,
> and while the common
> cattle run out to roam and graze,
> the loftiest neck is chosen for the axe.
> Whatever Fortune raises on high,
> she lifts to cast down. (96-102)

Fortune is explicitly referred to in the last two lines (*quidquid in altum Fortuna tulit, ruitura levat*), but from context we can see that the 'Fortuna' to which these lines refer is a law of nature or universal truth: great things are vulnerable to destruction. This means that the demise of great things can more or less be predicted to occur sooner or later. In that sense, they are all "fated" to be destroyed. But this is not to say

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37   See for example Trojan Women: "The higher Fortune raises and exalts human might, the more the fortunate should humble themselves and tremble at shifting circumstance, fearing overly favorable gods" (259-263, cf. 1-4, 529-531).

the specific events that occur in the play, are necessarily under the control of certain and specific forces, or will inevitably be brought about through the action of certain and specific external causes. They are not necessarily "fated" in *that* sense. As with so many of the devices mentioned above therefore, this one creates a general atmosphere familiar from classical tragedy by creating the vague feeling that the events we are about to witness have something inevitable—even inescapable—about them at the same time that it also allows Seneca to avoid directly asserting they are "fated" in the strict sense of 'determined by external causes over which humans have no control.'

In some respects, the changes Seneca makes to tragedy are all the more remarkable given that they are relatively minor: in most cases, he merely reduces mention of external causes to a bare minimum. But as we have seen, this small change is sufficient, in most cases, to change the conflict at the center of the play, and ultimately, to make tragedy more responsive to Stoic concerns.

Overall, then, I hope to have shown that there were three problems with tragedy with which Seneca would have had to grapple, and that his plays suggest some ways in which he may have sought to address these problems. The foregoing should further show that, in answer to the question whether Seneca's plays are "Stoic," we need not conclude, either that Seneca abandoned Stoicism to write tragedy, or that he intentionally set out to write Stoic tragedies. Nor is this the question from which an inquiry into Senecan tragedy should begin. As I hope to have shown, the more fundamental question is which elements of tragedy Stoics regarded as problematic, and whether, with adjustments, these elements *could* be rendered compatible with Stoicism. Having now shown that Seneca *did* have some methods at his disposal for making tragedy less objectionable from a Stoic point of view, and that, in fact, Seneca appears to have availed himself of these methods, we can safely conclude that he did *indeed* pursue a third course of action and retain as much of tragedy as possible while minimizing its dangers. Whether Seneca was actually able to do this without depriving tragedy of its tragic character and changing it beyond recognition is a question

for another day.

7 Conclusion

In conclusion, Seneca changes the conflict at the center of classical tragedy so that the protagonists of his plays no longer suffer a conflict between internal causes driving them from within and external causes compelling them from without, the latter of which ultimately overwhelm the former. By employing various strategies for deemphasizing the role of external causes in instigating protagonists' internal conflicts and their resulting actions, he reframes tragedy around a conflict internal to the individual. Doing so allows him to solve two of the most important problems Stoics had identified with poetry: that of the audience's identification with vicious protagonists and that of the combination of virtues and vices in a single protagonist. By these means, Seneca is able to produce tragedies that agree more with Stoic sensibilities, or at least, do not too overtly offend them.

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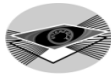
Border Crossings in the Japanese Anime *YURI!!! on ICE*

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Abstract

YURI!!! on ICE (broadcast in Japan between October 5 and December 22, 2016), a Japanese anime featuring male figure skaters from across the world in the International Skating Union Grand Prix Final, has become very popular globally. It even attracted the world's top figure skaters, such as Evgenia Medvedeva, Johnny Weir, and Stéphane Lambiel, who not only recommended the anime on their Twitter accounts but also were involved in various promotional events. The anime's huge success lies in the production team's intentional effort in crossing the boundaries of nationality, sexuality, and virtual reality. In this article, I analyse the ways in which the anime creates something in-between and hardly to be categorised—something that is neither real nor virtual, neither Japanese nor foreign, and neither BL nor gay. The anime serves as a tribute to both real-world competitive figure skating and an ideal Utopia in which all competitors and lovers, whether gay or straight, are treated equally with respect. It also demonstrates a brave and bold attempt to challenge established cultural and social norms by means of hybridsation and boundary crossing/blurring.

Keywords: boys love (BL), Japanese anime, globalisation, Cool Japan, hybridity

Border Crossings in the Japanese Anime *Yuri!! on ICE*

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Aired on 5 October 2016 in Japan (IMDb, n.d.), *YURI!!! on ICE* is a Japanese anime featuring male figure skaters from around the world competing for the International Skating Union (ISU) Grand Prix of Figure Skating Championship. The main story line is about Japanese skater Yuri Katsuki's revival from a low career towards the Grand Prix Final, assisted by the coaching and affectionate friendship of Russian five-time World Champion Victor Nikiforov. An exceptional case in the Japanese industry of anime, comics, games, and novel (ACGN), the anime is an original production rather than an adaptation of any existing works. It achieved great popularity in Japan during its broadcasting period, as its official Twitter site has attracted around 465,000 followers worldwide since its launch in 2016 (@yurionice_PR on twitter, n.d.).

These fans come from both ACGN and non-ACGN audiences, including quite a few professional figure skaters such as Evgenia Medvedeva, a gold medallist in the ladies' singles at the 2017 World Figure Skating Championships and holder of 'new scoring world records on 13 occasions' (International Skating Union, 2021; Olympic Channel, 2021). Medvedeva, who is both a skating champion and self-professed otaku, 'has expressed her appreciation for the show—especially its more erotic scenes—on her Twitter feed' (Stimson, 2016). As reported by *Honey's Anime* (2016), Medvedeva promoted *YURI!!! on ICE* via her own Twitter account with extreme enthusiasm and even cosplayed Yuri Katsuki, one of the anime's most popular protagonists.

Since the last episode (ep. 12) released on 21 December 2016, there has been no sign of a second-season production of TV anime series (Troup, 2020). Yet fans may still have a semblance of hope from the scene of the ending song featuring the two main characters Victor and Yuri Kat-

suki performing pair skating and a snapshot of their life in St. Petersburg, in addition to the message 'See You Next Level' at the very end (Mirar, 2016b). After a year's wait, the anime's production company MAPPA Co., LTD. (http://www.mappa.co.jp/) announced at an event in 2017 a project of producing the anime film entitled *ICE ADOLESCENCE* (@yurionice_PR, 2018), scheduled for premier in 2020 (Troup, 2020). Due to the COVID-19 epidemic in 2020, the production was delayed with no specific date of release (YURI!!! on ICE the Movie: ICE ADOLESCENCE, n.d.). Later a short teaser PV anime was uploaded to YouTube on 26 November 2020, which 'was exclusively released at last year [2019]'s theatrical screening of Yuri!!! on ICE [sic] TV series' (avex pictures, 2020), showing the 17-year-old Victor appearing to skate for Winter Olympics (Troup, 2020; Llewellyn, 2020). The video's popularity with 2,579,038 views and 290,000 likes (avex pictures, 2020) demonstrate both the anime fans' support of the forthcoming anime film and the likelihood of the film's '[giving] new life to the fandom' (Troup, 2020).

In addition to its huge popularity and commercial success, the anime has won numerous awards. According to the report of Anime News Network (Loveridge, 2017), it even won first place in online voting for the 2017 Tokyo Anime Awards' Anime of the Year, with 41,439 votes. It was also a winner of the 2017 Crunchyroll Anime Awards: Best Couple for Yuri & Victor; Best Opening for 'History Maker'; Best Ending; Anime of the Year; Best Boy for Yuri Katsuki; Best Anime; and Most Heartwarming Scene for the kiss from Ep.7. In the Tokyo Anime Award 2018 it won Fan Prize in the Television Category as shown in IMDb (2021). Clearly it is a huge achiever in the industry, as Ian Wolf comments, '*Yuri!!! On ICE* [sic] is on course to make a clean sweep and win all seven of the categories it was nominated in' (Wolf, 2017a). Most importantly, the anime was the sole winner of Crunchyroll's first-ever 'Anime of the Year Award' (Fryer, 2017), despite complaints from a proportion of Crunchyroll users about some *YURI!!! on ICE* fans' controversial voting behaviour (Wolf, 2017b).

1 Literature Review, Theoretical Framework, and Methodology

Until the date of submitting this paper (April 21, 2021), there have been around ten English publications on *YURI!!! on ICE*. A majority of them focused on fandom (McInroy and Craig, 2018; Zhang, 2018; Morimoto, 2019; Santos, 2019) and queerness (Laws, 2017; Mehta, 2021). Taking a slightly different approach, Karl Ian U. Cheng Chua invokes scholarly attention to the engagement of South-East Asian fans as a counterargument against the globalist perspective based on Koichi Iwabuchi's transnational theory of 'culturally odorless' (Cheng Chua, 2018, p.29, p.34). Another set of studies examine the cross-cultural elements (esp. gender and sexuality) of the anime, such as Tien-yi Chao's study of imagined Russian identity in the anime (2019).

Given its global popularity, *YURI!!! on ICE* should be viewed as a milestone in Japanese anime history and thus worthy of scholarly attention. Inspired by the above studies, this paper aims to extend Iwabuchi's observation of Japan's transnational soft power based upon culturally odorless products (2004, 2015) to the case study of *YURI!!! on ICE*. I contend that the anime is important in its innovative, 'border-crossing' nature that distinguishes it from other conventional or mainstream Japanese anime. The anime is likely to become a successful model of the effective 'pop-culture diplomacy and the Cool Japan policy', which, according to Iwabuchi's interpretation, involves 'selling more Japanese cultural products and enhancing certain national images' (2015, p.425).

In addition, the analysis in the main body seeks to explore and illustrate the phenomenon of cultural hybridity by looking at the anime's charaterisation, settings, and plot. Based upon the notions of cultural hybridity and Cool Japan, this paper will discuss the ways in which *YURI!!! on ICE* crosses three borders of facts vs fiction, nationality, and sexuality. The fundamental research methodology applied for this study was textual and intertextual analysis of various materials ranging from scenes and contents of the anime, news reports, commentary articles, and interviews, to social media (facebook/Reddit/Tumblr/Twitter posts and comments), with a focus on English-language comments and fan-

dom. As I will demonstrate in later pages, such a wide choice of data helps in developing a case study of *YURI!!! on ICE* to decode the intricate border-crossing elements created by the anime and its production team, with a focus on their hybrid nature.

Following this introduction, the findings of this study will be discussed in three sections. In the section 'Border crossing 1', I will address the anime's success in connecting the imaginative world of figure skating with real-life figure skaters in Japan and abroad. Under 'Border crossing 2', I will focus on transcultural communication and cultural hybridisation facilitated by *YURI!!! on ICE*'s characterisation, plot, and settings. Under 'Border crossing 3', I will elaborate on the blurring gender/sex boundaries presented by the anime, especially those among homosociality, homosexuality, and boys love (BL)/bromances. In so doing, the study aims to contribute to the latest scholarship on Japanese anime and cultural studies by stimulating further exchange and communication on the anime's impact in terms of globalisation and glocalisation.

2 Border crossing 1: imaginary world vs. real world

Non-anime fans tend to have two common misconceptions about anime: anime is only for otaku or fans, and anime is unrealistic and based on wild imagination and alternative universes, similar to all products in otaku culture (e.g. manga, games, light novels). Yet, as I will demonstrate in this section, *YURI!!! on ICE* challenges these two misconceptions by crossing and blurring the boundary in three aspects: characterisation, glocalization, and connection between the imaginary world in the anime and the real world of figure skating.

Unlike a majority of Japanese anime, the characters in *YURI!!! on ICE* are based on actual celebrity figure skaters. As the anime's author Mitsurō Kubo points out in an interview (Dunham, 2016), 'Real skaters also have an amazing sensuality, so we'd really like to depict a fresh, pure sensuality that will not lose to bishōjo anime.' Additionally, she is knowledgeable of ISU events and international figure skaters. Her

purpose for creating the anime is 'to cheer for the entire skating world. I want to channel those feelings into *Yuri!!! on ICE* [sic] and make sure that it reaches as many people as possible' (Dunham, 2016). Indeed, a quick look at the images and snapshots of the main characters (especially those in the figure skating world) reminds the audience of their real-world counterparts —Evgeni Viktorovich Plushenko, Stéphane Lambiel, Johnny Weir, Yulia Vyacheslavovna Lipnitskaya (prototype for Yuri Plisetsky in *YURI!!! on ICE*), and Daisuke Takahashi, to name just a few. Some other real-life figure skaters and sports announcers even appear as special guest characters in *YURI!!! on ICE*, such as Taihei Katō, the real-life announcer who played the role of the fictional announcer Hisashi Morooka in the anime (Inyxception Enterprises, n.d.). In episode 12, skaters Lambiel and Nobunari Oda also featured as commentators in episode 12 (Mirar, 2016a). Fans also pointed out in discussion threads that a snapshot in the same episode shows a Yuzuru Hanyū look-alike appearing on the cover of the *Ice Jewels* magazine (a Japanese magazine on figure skating, established in 2015) held by JJ, the fictional Canadian figure skater in the anime (LetTheHandsTouch2k18, 2016).

Interestingly, many of the real-life skaters showed excitement and enthusiasm about being the 'prototype' for the anime's characters. This is particularly obvious in the case of Weir and Lambiel, who frequently tweeted and retweeted about *YURI!!! on ICE*. According to an interview with Johnny Weir, one of the journalists told Weir that it was Sayo Yamamoto, the director of the anime, who 'credited you for capturing their interest in figure skating with your performance of Poker Face, and you've clearly been an inspiration to the story itself' (Exorcising Emily, 2016). Even Victor's costume (including the flower crown he wears) in his junior competition was modelled on Weir's skating costume and accessories for the 2006 and 2010 Olympics respectively (Exorcising Emily, 2016). Here Weir's response not only proves the parallels between his skating performance and the anime's settings, but also expresses a clear sense of joy and honour about such a border crossing exchange:

There are so many parallels that I've noticed while watching

the show. I changed coaches and competed in Cup of China and Cup of Russia when *I was 23 and trying to reinvigorate my career like Yuri-kun. My junior world championship victory was in Sofia, Bulgaria like Viktor.* I even was one of the first skaters who traveled with my own special tissue box starring my favorite cartoon, Cheburashka. Of course, the homage to my Swan costume from Torino and my rose crown in Vancouver from one of my dearest fans, were very special moments in my life and I'm so happy to see them show up now in a show I love.

I am very honored that the production team has taken some inspiration not just from me, but from the skating world. There are so many details that pop up that wouldn't mean anything to a casual skating fan, but to us as skaters who actually lived it, you can see so much respect for our world and what we do through the animes and story lines.

(Emily, 2016; my emphasis)

If character design based on and endorsed by real-life celebrities is common in Japanese ACGN, then the production team crossed the borderline between virtuality and reality by introducing the anime into official ISU competitions and events. Early in the ISU World Team Trophy in Tokyo from April 20 to 23 in 2017, 'this year's event is featuring a *Yuri!!! On ICE* [sic] collaboration with sales of goods kits showcasing a visual with the anime's skaters having a bit too much fun' (Green, 2017). As shown in the anime's PR Tweet, the poster features main characters of the anime gathering and competing for the trophy (@yurionice_PR, 2017). Later the anime's production team launched the same collaboration again for the 2019 ISU World Team Trophy; the official announcement on the anime's website shows a new poster featuring the anime's main characters, along with photos of Makkachin (Victor's pet poodle) acting as a mascot at the ice rink (YURI!!! on ICE Project, 2019). These promotional campaigns can be seen as a strong case of soft power, as defined by Joseph Nye in his most cited book, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*:

> A country may obtain the outcomes it wants in world politics
> because other countries – admiring its values, emulating its ex-
> ample, aspiring to its level of prosperity and openness – want
> to follow it. In this sense, it is also important to set the agenda
> and attract others in world politics, and not only to force them
> to change by threatening military force or economic sanctions.
> This soft power – getting others to want the outcomes that you
> want – co-opts people rather than coerces them.
>
> (Nye, 2004, p. 5)

Many follow-up tweets of the ISU-*YURI!!! on ICE* collaboration present skaters of various nationalities posing joyfully in front of the above-mentioned special poster, celebrating the 2017 World Team Trophy in both the real-world and along with the anime characters in their own parallel universe of the event. This indicates a win-win situation: the anime was introduced to figure skaters (most of whom were not anime fans), while the anime fans who were not familiar with figure skating were attracted to the sport and relevant events. By doing so, both MAPPA the anime company and the Japan Skating Federation demonstrated immense soft power of 'Cool Japan' (Watson, 2016; Hashimoto, 2018) to the world.

Further implementation of *YURI!!! on ICE* and its products occurred after the ISU-*YURI!!! on ICE* collaboration. The most significant example was Japanese skaters Miu Suzaki and Ryuichi Kihara using 'Yuri on ICE', the anime's theme music representing the main character Yuri Katsuki, for their Pairs SP (short programme) performances at Skate Detroit in 2017 and 2017 NHK Trophy (Loveridge, 2017; @fencer-x, 2017). Later in the Pyeong Chang 2018 Winter Olympics, they 'delighted anime fans by performing a figure skating routine set to music from the popular Yuri on ICE [sic] animated series' (Gerken, 2018). The video footage of the pair's performance has attracted 2,637,838 views, 170,000 likes, and 4,533 comments since its release on 20 August 2018, as many viewers expressed amazement about such a ground-breaking arrangement (Olympic, 2018). According to the news report, the footage 'was widely shared on social media as users instantly recognised the accompanying music' (Gerken, 2018). The two skaters of Team Japan and

the *YURI!!! on ICE* production team succeeded in attracting the world's attention, even though it had been more than a year since the end of the anime in December 2016.

Despite the production team's active engagement with ISU and the figure skating circle, *YURI!!! on ICE*'s characters are not merely imitations or parodies of real-life figure skaters. Rather, the anime's characterisation is a mixture of iconic features attributed to both the real world and the anime world. As A. S. Lu (2009, p. 185) points out: "[S]ome of anime's international success may be due to the perceived racial ambiguity of its characters. Such ambiguous features may have been internalized into anime character design". Similar examples can also be seen in *YURI!!! on ICE*, as its characterisation is a mixture of various international celebrities. According to the production team, for instance, the characterisation of the hero Yuri Katsuki is based on former Japanese figure skaters Tatsuki Machida and Daisuke Takahashi, while many *YURI!!! on ICE* fans attribute Yuri to the extremely popular Japanese figure skater Yuzuru Hanyū because of his appearance and '*moe*' demeanour (cute nature), as well as because 'Yūri's short program *Eros* matches Japanese figure skater Yuzuru Hanyū [sic] 2014 Sochi Olympic Short Program' (Hanashiro, 2016). The other two central characters, Yuri Plisetsky and Victor Nikiforov, are also based on real-life figure skaters. Mitsurō Kubo has openly admitted that Yuri Plisetsky's character deign was based on the Russian former skater Julia Lipnitskaia; on the other hand, Victor shares significant similarities with the legend Russian skater Evgeni Plushenko, aka 'The King of Ice' (Ellingworth, 2014), even though the production team has never acknowledged these parallels until now (Chao, 2019, pp. 66–67). Despite the debates on the exact origin of *YURI!!! on ICE*'s characters, it is undeniable that their connection with real-world figure skaters helps attract potential audience members with both otaku and non-otaku backgrounds. The anime's popularity demonstrates successful and skillful maneuvers of virtual and realistic resources in creating characters of various nationalities and personality traits.

YURI!!! on ICE's successful strategy is not limited to incorporating

elements in the real world into anime (based on a fantasized world of figure skating). Scholars such as Otto F. von Feigenblatt (2010) agree that the fusion of Japanese and Western cultural icons is pervasive in Japanese otaku products. In this case, one may find such a mosaic hybridization of cultural memes pervasive in *YURI!!! on ICE*; the characters are multinational, yet their foreignness is mixed with a trace of Japanese flavor, either from the mentality of real Japanese people or from the virtual elements of Japanese anime.

In *YURI!!! on ICE*, one of the representations of Japanese otaku culture is the dramatic or even slightly childish variation of the characters inserted (abruptly or timely) into the main plot. According to the conventions of Japanese anime, such an insertion or distortion typically functions as a kind of comic release, either to ease the tension of the main storyline or simply to entertain the audience.

Two examples are provided here. First, in episode 1 (2:33), a melancholic scene with Yuri Katsuki is immediately followed by his *chibi* figure popping up to introduce himself (@seriftxt, 2017). According to Mami Suzuki's definition, *chibi* in Japanese means 'small' or 'short' (2016); '[i]t's usually applied to objects, animals, or people (i.e. a short person or a small child)' (2016). The sudden switch from the normal characterisation to the *chibi* figures may look abrupt and ridiculous to viewers of American animation. However, this is a very common visual device to Japanese anime fans, sometimes even becoming formulaic. Another use of this parody-like *chibi* figure is in episode 10, 15:36 (Yamamoto, 2017c), when Yuri Katsuki mentions that he did not talk to Victor at last year's banquet (which is completely inaccurate and all guests recall Yuri being too drunk that night to remember talking and even dancing with Victor). Notably, the next scene shows Victor in a comically exaggerated facial expression, with beer spitting from his mouth (Baker-Whitelaw, 2021). The above examples do not seem to abate the dramatic tension of the scenes, but rather add more charm to the characters. These visual representations in *YURI!!! on ICE* have two important meanings. First, they serve as a bridge between the 'two-dimensional' otaku world and the 'three-dimensional' world in our daily life, creating a 'third space'

in-between. Second, they more or less reveal the characters' mentality to the audience—such disclosures actually contribute to their charisma rather than damage it.

3 Border crossing 2: multiple nationalities and globalization

The second border crossing is effectuated in *YURI!!! on ICE*'s cross-national characterisation and scenes featuring cross-cultural communication. Transnational cultural exchanges are also significant in the visual display of landscape and local cultures in the anime. Almost every episode of the anime involves cross-cultural and foreign elements, as the story involves a foreigner (Victor)'s life in a Japanese hot springs resort as well as international figure skating events located in various countries. While Victor and Yuri Plisetsky, the two foreign visitors to Japan, enjoy Japanese katsudon (i.e. fried pork fillet with egg onion sauce, served with steamed rice) and hot springs, Yuri Katsuki is also fascinated by foreign foods and attractions during his Grand Prix tournament around the world. More importantly, these 'exotic' Japanese and foreign items not purely come from the production team's imagination; rather, they represent real locations and items. For instance, *YURI!!! on ICE* fans have been working painstakingly to track down the original source of each landmark and item in the anime, including Yuri's hometown Hasetsu (which is based on Karatsu and Saga in Kyushu, Japan (Donko, 2016), Utopia Katsuki (the hot springs hotel run by Yuri's family), Barcelona Princess Hotel (accommodation for Grand Prix competitors), the hot pot restaurant in Beijing (appearing in episode 7, when Yuri competes for Grand Prix of China), Victor's flat in St. Petersburg, and even the lip balm applied by Victor to Yuri Katsuki's lips in episode 5 (which turns out to be similar to a CHANEL product).

The above phenomenon reminds one of studies on the issue of Japanese ACGN products' transnational features and impacts, from Iwabuchi's question about 'How "Japanese" is Pokémon?' (2004) to Fabienne Darling-Wolf's investigation into the questionable national identity of Miyazaki's *Heidi* (2016). Similarly, *YURI!!! on ICE* encompasses cultural hybridity in both characterisation and plot. As mentioned in the

section 'Border crossing 1', the anime's characters are mainly international figure skaters. These skaters, like their real-world counterparts, live a life full of globalization and cross-culturalism. Many of them train outside of their home countries and travel abroad frequently to compete in various events. For example, Yuri Katsuki used to reside in Detroit, USA during his four-year training period and returns to Japan after discontinuing the contract with his former coach. This may remind viewers of Yuzuru Hanyū, who has been coached by Brian Orser in Toronto, Canada since 2012, along with Spanish medalist Javier Fernánde (Hersh, 2014). In addition, with the exception of very short footage of Lambiel speaking French, *YURI!!! on ICE* is dubbed in Japanese (or in English in the official English version for a global English-speaking audience) throughout the 12 episodes. However, it is likely that the skaters would actually speak (non-native) English to each other most of the time, especially when Victor is coaching Yuri Katsuki. A scene from episode 6 illustrates such inconsistency: at the end of the episode, Yuri announces his determination to win the Grand Prix Final gold medal, and acknowledges the love of his family and friends, which he has just recently recognized. At this time, Yuri's family and friends who are watching on television are touched by his words; however, Victor, who seems bewildered and unable to understand the Japanese announcement made by Yuri on television, only grumbles to himself that he is going to burn Yuri's ugly necktie.

Although language barriers and cultural shock are not issues addressed by *YURI!!! on ICE*, cross-cultural communication contributes to the depth of its plot. An example of this is the scene of exchanging rings in episode 10, in which Yuri Katsuki places the golden ring—which he claims is a lucky charm based on his success at the Grand Prix Final— on Victor's right ring finger (Yamamoto, 2017c, 13:39—14:40). The ring exchange scene soon becomes one of the anime's signature visual display of male/male romantic relationship, even though the anime's author Kubo explained in an interview that the pair of rings is a common sort of '"omamori," protective charms', worn by many skaters, rather than wedding rings: 'More than implicating something like a wedding, *it's similar to members of the same circle deciding to have a matching item*'

(toraonice, 2017a). Yet still, after the episode aired, a number of *YURI!!! on ICE* fans discovered that in Russia and Eastern Orthodox countries, people actually wear wedding rings on their right ring finger (toraonice, 2017b; weeb-collector, 2017). Such a discovery soon aroused enthusiastic discussions online about whether or not Victor would regard the ring as a wedding ring (see an example at u/Holo_of_Yoitsu, 2016). Although the production team has not yet released any formal statements about this, the scene demonstrates an idealistic approach to cross-cultural communication, namely empathy and understanding with an open mind. In other words, Victor may wonder why Yuri Katsuki places the ring on his 'wedding ring' finger, but he chooses to be open-minded and accept it as symbol of Yuri's commitment to their relationship.

In addition to plot and characterisation, even the music used was international. This is obvious in the opening song 'The History Maker', which features English lyrics performed by Dean Fujioka, an actor-singer who was born in Japan, studying in USA, then residing in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Indonesia, before returning to Japan. The skating music used also represents an extensive array of music of various genres and languages (most are in English and Western style), in which one can hardly sense any 'Japan-ness'. This not only is indicative of globalization in real-life figure skating, which is still dominated by Western countries, but also corresponds with Iwabuchi's notion of 'culturally ordorless' Japanese products (2002, p. 24). Judged by its popularity with fans around the world, *YURI!!! on ICE* was successful in creating a highly globalized setting that caters to the needs of a worldwide audience.

Despite the positive presentation of globalization, it is still necessary to be aware of the hidden yet pervasive traces of Japanese elements. The icon of 'Japan-ness' is the consistent reoccurrence of katsudon, a Japanese household meal usually eaten to celebrate 'victory', such as passing an exam or winning a game, for 'the word "katsu" is pronounced the same as the Japanese verb for being victorious or to win' (Yasuka, 2012). In the anime, katsudon first appears as Yuri Katsuki's favorite food, while later it becomes part of Yuri's identity (as he is nicknamed by Yuri Plisetsky as 'Katsudon') and charisma that deeply attracts Victor.

The iconised image of katsudon reminds one of many cultural products (such as Pokémon) created and displayed as a campaign of Japan's soft power, namely the image of 'Cool Japan' (Iwabuchi 2002, 2004) and, in my view, Cute Japan. The marketing of 'Cool Japan' is not limited to ACGN (i.e. 2-dimensional world), but extended to the real 3-dimensional world. The most notable case in recent time is the former Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe wearing a red Super Mario hat to represent Japan's national identity at the closing ceremony of the 2016 Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro (Watson 2016; Grau 2019). Although no data have been found to prove that the anime creator MAPPA is funded or requested by the Japanese government to implement 'Cool Japan' in its anime works, there are still signs of maneuvering Japan's positive image and values. For instance, the iconisation of Yuri-katsudon is part of the cultural export of 'Cool/Cute Japan', corresponding with the Cool Japan Strategy Promotion Council's 2015 proposal for attracting foreigners' interest in 'Japan's goodness' (Hashimoto, 2018, pp. 52-53).

Returning to the visual signs of border crossing transculturalism in *YURI!!! on ICE*, the most cogent example is the 'katsudon pirozhki', appearing in episode 9 of the anime. As Chao (2019, p. 74) points out, this hybrid food is consistent with the transcultural feature of the anime. Additionally, the characters, especially Victor, Yuri the Japanese, and Yuri the Russian, visit each other's home country to experience new cultures with an open mind, and then to create a new cross-cultural identity, which is likely common to many real-life figure skaters active in international events. From the audience's perspective, all of these constructs—friendships among skaters from different countries and a medley of exotic foreign foods and attractions—create a hub of cultural exchanges, allowing the characters and audience to cross the borders of nationality and unite in the 'Utopia' created by the anime.

4 Border crossing 3: (homo-) sexuality

The third border crossing lies in the ways in which *YURI!!! on ICE* presents homosociality and homosexuality. The anime has attracted

both heterosexual and homosexual audiences, as well as both fans and non-fans of boys love (BL), a subgenre in Japanese ACGN, featuring romantic and/or erotic relationships between men. Similar to the sub-culture of slash, BL fans enjoy the practice of 'shipping,' namely high-lighting the romantic or erotic bond between two male characters in BL, non-BL, or queerbaiting texts and media, seeing the shipped characters as a couple. As Leandra Laws (2017, p. 6) observes, even though the anime is not categorised as BL, iclt can be regarded as a nuanced case of 'The Evolution of Boys' Love' —it does contain BL elements (such as the soulmate-like relationship between Victor and Yuri Katsuki) while some major BL features are missing, such as the *seme*/*uke* dichotomy (8), in which *seme* usually takes the sex role of top while *uke* the bottom. Sameera Mehta also remarks on the anime's hybridisation of gender and sexuality:

> YOI ruptures both modes of reading homosexual romance; nei-ther are the couple simply stand-ins for the transference of fe-male sexuality, nor do they play out dynamics that defines com-mon perception of homosexual relationships. This is where the interplay of the feminine-masculine dialectic serves to synthe-sise either/or readings and present a nuanced take on sexuality.
> Sameera Mehta (2021, p. 69)

Under such a backdrop, I would like to extend the issue of hybridity by further complicating the anime's 'in-between' nature. The portrayal of male/male relationship in *YURI!!! on ICE* can be interpreted in two ways: one is that the anime highlights the homosexual and homosocial elements of figure skating; the other is that it may deliberately incor-porate elements of male friendship or bromance (even to the extent of queerbaiting, such as the scenes discussed later in this section) to attract BL fans (even though the anime is not labelled as BL) or to promote LGBTQ rights.

In the real world, figure skating, in particular male figure skaters, are often perceived as homosexual. According to Abigail Jones (2014), the effeminate nature and aesthetics of figure skating make it prone to ho-

mophobia and fantasies of homosexuality: 'The common assumption that male figure skaters are gay—and the latent and often blatant hostility behind it—is the sport's deep and dirty secret. It colors the attitudes and actions of skaters, coaches, judges, officials and even the fans.' However, as common in sports, homosexuality is still taboo in figure skating, with very few athletes coming out. One example is Brian Orser (Yuzuru Hanyū's Canadian coach and former Canadian champion), whose homosexuality was disclosed involuntarily in 1998, which resulted in great controversy (Jones, 2014). More recently, Johnny Weir is arguably the most famous figure skater who announced his homosexuality, while other skaters have remained silent about their sexuality, leaving it subject to gossip, tabloid fodder, and speculation.

Compared with the homophobic world of real-life figure skating, the world in *YURI!!! on ICE* is overly gay-friendly, containing a significant proportion of bromance elements, even to the extent of BL. In recent years, there have been an increasing number of Japanese sports-themed ACG works with special reference to homosocial or bromantic/BL, such as *Kuroko's Basketball*, *Free!!*, and *Haikyu!!* (the word means 'volleyball' in Japanese). This is based on a long moralistic tradition in Japanese ACG culture, in which teamwork and friendship are celebrated as keys to success (Brent Allison, 2017, pp. 21–22). Even though the above works have nothing to do with gay love, their emphasis of male/male friendship has inspired fans to create a large amount of BL fan works that fantasise and even eroticise same-sex friendships. *YURI!!! on ICE* follows the same bromantic pattern, while it moves further from the conventional settings of male sports manga/anime by adding BL elements to the plot and dialogue. As I will elaborate shortly, the anime emphasises the bond between Victor and Yuri Katsuki, as well as their quest for the true meaning of love in their lives.

Apart from the cute *chibi* figures referenced earlier, visual cues suggesting homoeroticism appear very often in the intervals of the main story as well; some of them even appear to be deliberately set as BL. The first homoerotic (BL) scene appears in episode 2 (5:22), in which Victor, who has just arrived in Japan, approaches Yuri Katsuki using a

highly erotic gesture, with an equally erotic line: 'Let's build some trust in our relationship' (Yamamoto, 2017a). The scene shows Victor holding Yuri's chin, in an attempt to get to know Yuri better. This is a typical visual cue of seduction in BL, even though the plot does not suggest any sexual desire from either party. As the plot progresses, more intimate physical actions occur, such as touches and hugs between the two central characters as their relationship becomes more intimate. In episode 4 (4:33), for example, Victor touches Yuri's lips, while stating rather erotically, 'No one in the whole wide world knows your eros, Yuri' (Yamamoto, 2017b). Here the foreign word of エロス (Eros) is mentioned in the anime. Defined by Cambridge Dictionary (n.d.), Eros means both the Greek God of Love and 'sexual love or desire' (usually in small letters for this meaning). Against such a backdrop, it was not surprising to see a huge explosion of *YURI!!! on ICE* fan works (shipping Victor and Yuri Katsuki as a couple) being produced just after the anime's release in October 2016.

Despite no explicit disclosure of homosexuality, the anime's later episodes suggest an obvious development of deep affection—at least as soul mates, if not homosexual love—between Victor and Yuri Katsuki. It reaches a climax with the symbolic display of the ring exchange in episode 10 (Yamatomo, 2017c). Interestingly, when Yuri Katsuki's friend Pichit Chulanont incorrectly announces the 'marriage' between Yuri and Victor, the crowd in the restaurant simply give the 'couple' a round of applause to show their support. Compared with the secretive (and perhaps stigmatized) homosexuality in real-life figure skating, in *YURI!!! on ICE*, the whole world appears to be open-minded and even positive about homosexuality, which seems too good to be true. In fact, according to the author Mitsurō Kubo, the anime is a story of love instead of a love story 'in the narrow sense of a "love affair," or "carnal love' (Bridges and Chapman, 2017). Accordingly, the world in the anime welcomes all kinds of love, regardless of sexuality—here Yuri Katsuki, Victor, Yuri Plisetsky, other skaters, along with their friends and family, all endeavor to achieve love and life.

Even though the production team has dismissed connections with same-

sex romance and eroticism, in many ways *YURI!!! on ICE* still emphasises gay-friendliness, which can be seen in the 'official shipping' (namely a pair of male characters promoted, or at least presented, as a couple by the production team, either explicitly or inexplicitly) in the anime and its official merchandise.[1] From posters and magazines to toys, we see at least two major ships (mainly Victor and Yuri Katsuki, plus Yuri Plisetsky and the Kazakhstani skater Otabek Altin) posing together like close male friends or even couples. This has been repeated for many times, even after the last episode in December 2016. While other sports-themed Japanese ACGN works popular in BL/*Yaoi* fandom (such as *Kuroko's Basketball* and *Free!!*) tend to minimize scenes with homosexuality or same-sex affection, *YURI!!! on ICE* consists of numerous scenes that are more explicit about male/male relationships without actually disclosing the characters' sexuality. Despite occasional criticism of queerbaiting (perhaps as a marketing device to attract BL fans), the overall positive reception from the audience, award judges, and cultural critics, shows the anime's proactive approach to homosexuality, while simultaneously avoiding being labelled as BL. It may well serve as an effective strategy to challenge the existing categories of Japanese ACGN, by crossing the borders between gay, BL, and straight.[2]

5. Conclusion

This article examined *YURI!!! on ICE* as an innovative and extraordinary case in the Japanese anime industry. The above findings and discussions, with a focus on English media, English-speaking communities, and English resources, affirmed the anime's success in crossing and blurring the borders of virtual reality, nationality, and sexuality. Despite the limitation of scope and data, this study is hoped to contribute to the existing scholarship of Japanese anime and BL by exploring

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1   See the following webpages for a few examples (the two widely acknowledged 'official shippings' are Victor and Yuri Katsuki, along with Otabek and Yuri Plisetsky) in the official *Yuri!! on ICE* spinoffs: https://twitter.com/solty_tsubuyaki/status/998761741524725760; https://twitter.com/MAPPA_Info/status/1058554624066576385; https://twitter.com/tvusagi5/status/1016930130961129472; the most obvious one is the following official artwork showing Victor and Yuri K as if they are at their own wedding: https://www.pinterest.com/pin/466192998918758707

2   I thank the anonymous reviewer for bringing this point to my attention.

the anime's hybrid and cross-cultural nature, as well as its attempt to move beyond the existing categories and conventions. The core spirit of *YURI!!! on ICE*, or at least the aspiration of the production team, can be summarised by the title and the lyrics of its opening song, 'History Maker' (avex pictures, 2016), namely breaking through the established norms. This applies particularly to the anime's characters, who strive to unsettle the boundaries of nationality, culture, and gender/sex.

YURI!!! on ICE challenges and subverts existing patterns and boundaries. This echoes the remarks made by Mitsurō Kubo in an interview in September 2016: 'I would like to create a work in which you'll come to love all three characters, and enjoy the figure skating.... I threw all of my strength into this work as a staff member in these two years' (Comic Natale, 2016). Director Sayo Yamamoto followed up by stating, 'I approached figure skating as well as anime with my sincere feelings. So I am doing my best to create something that will satisfy fans of both sides' (Comic Natale, 2016). This facilitates an in-between zone of ambiguity and hybridity, allowing different and even opposing identities to mingle, mutate, and thrive. It is also hoped that future studies will examine further the anime's deployment of cross-cultural, cross-genre, and cross-gender elements, as well as the extent to which these features are perceived by audience in Japan and non-English-speaking regions.

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