

Free Speech and Neo-Stoicist Inwardness
The Divided Self in Ben Jonson's Sejanus His Fall

Ben Jonson's *Sejanus His Fall* probably premiered in May 1603 and was printed in a revised version in autumn 1605.¹ Jonson's Roman tragedy is a deeply researched study of the political culture of Imperial Rome and painstakingly follows the historical record in its portrayal of the Emperor Tiberius and the rise and fall of his favourite Sejanus. However, the play is also a product of the transition from the Tudor to the Stuart dynasty with all its hopes, fears, and insecurities, especially with regard to the new monarch's religious policies, which were of great concern to Catholics like Jonson. As is often overlooked, the political crisis depicted in Jonson's play mirrors the issue of the royal succession, which inspired so much animosity between the different confessional parties in late Elizabethan England. Thus, Sejanus, who craves the throne for himself, turns the aging Emperor against the heirs of Germanicus, the adopted son of Tiberius, who 'were next in hope for the succession', as Jonson writes in the 'argument' to his play.² It is for this reason that Sejanus persuades the Emperor to take action against the supposedly treasonous Germanicans, so named after the head of the family, who has already died at the beginning of the play. Notably, the persecuted Germanicans bear remarkable similarities to late Elizabethan Catholics, which makes *Sejanus* a highly topical

¹ For the dates, I am following Tom Cain's introduction (CEWBJ 2:199–200). According to the folio title page, the play was 'Acted, in the yeere 1603' (*Workes* 355). Cain rejects the assumption of earlier editors that this may refer to the Christmas season 1603/4 and, owing to plague-related closures of the theatres, narrows the first performance down to the week between 9 and 16 May 1603. *Sejanus* was entered in the Stationers' Register in November 1604. As for the revisions in the 1605 quarto, Jonson declares in his epistle to the readers that 'this book, in all numbers, is not the same with that which was acted on the public stage, wherein a second pen had good share; in place of which I have rather chosen to put weaker (and no doubt less pleasing) of mine own, than to defraud so happy a genius of his right by my loathed usurpation' (CEWBJ 2:215, ll. 31–5). As for the identity of this 'second pen', the play's most recent editor favours George Chapman (Cain, CEWBJ 2:198). However, the *Authorship Companion* to the New Oxford Shakespeare revives the case for Shakespeare. See Taylor and Loughnane 538–42.

² CEWBJ 2:229, ll. 13–14; compare with Tacitus, *Annals* 4.12.

play in the context of the Elizabethan succession and the religious politics surrounding it.

Like *Sir Thomas More*, *Sejanus* is deeply concerned with the legitimate boundaries between privacy and the state's claim to transparency as well as the ethical and political implications of silence and dissimulation. It has been argued that Jonson's middle plays, from *Sejanus His Fall* to *Bartholomew Fair*, 'reveal a common concern with the dark side of intrigue'.³ However, *Sejanus* not only excoriates the secret machinations of its Machiavellian villains but is simultaneously concerned with the erosion of secrecy, the only refuge left to the Germanicans. Jonson's Roman tragedy explores the ethical and political implications of secrecy and dissimulation not primarily in theological categories, as is the case with many of the plays discussed in this book, including Jonson's later comedy *Bartholomew Fair*; rather, it addresses the issue of the divided self from the perspective of rhetoric, notably the potential for dissimulation inherent in classical interpretations of free speech, and the perspective of neo-Stoicist moral and political philosophy. This apparent secular turn is arguably owed not only to Jonson's historicism in his Roman tragedies but also to the threat of censorship and penal repercussions that loomed over *Sejanus* as much as over *Sir Thomas More*. Nonetheless, this chapter aims to demonstrate that *Sejanus* explores ethical and rhetorical rationales for dissimulation under a tyrannical regime while simultaneously expressing a critique of the persecution of inward dissent and the cynical instrumentalisation of treason charges, as was routinely voiced by Catholic polemicists from the late Elizabethan period. Finally, I will consider how Jonson's conflicted views on dissimulation are reflected in the status of *Sejanus* as a play and the political and ethical dangers which Jonson perceived in the medium in which he decided to write. First, however, some remarks on Catholic views on the succession of James I as well as the tumultuous first year of his reign, which were marked by the Gunpowder Plot and the seeming failure of the King's initial attempts to appease his new Catholic subjects, will serve to stake out the religious and political parameters within which *Sejanus* could have gained topical meaning.

The Succession Crisis and Jacobean Legislation of Catholic Dissent

Catholics had lived through one of their worst periods of persecution in England during the last two decades of Elizabeth's reign, but the prospect of a new monarch inspired hopes for a fresh start. Catholic loyalists such as

³ Slights 12.

William Watson, for instance, lobbied for a *politique* form of toleration and held up Henri IV's successful pacification of war-torn France as a model to be imitated by Elizabeth's successor.⁴ Even as late as in summer 1603, the Jesuit William Wright still believed that James would pursue an approach similar to Henri's *politique* solution to the Wars of Religion, the Edict of Nantes (1598): 'It will come to pass that we in England shall have a toleration as the Huguenots have in France'.⁵ Elizabeth's failure to produce an heir had made the succession an uncomfortably open question. However, as Wright's brother, Thomas Wright, recognised, these uncertainties gave Catholics leverage in negotiating for toleration: 'because it is very uncertain who succeeds . . . [E]very one of the pretenders will try all ways to bring the catholics to their sides. Which certainly they will never perform, unless faith be given that they will permit the catholic religion'.⁶ The Earl of Northumberland accordingly pointed out to James that 'it weare pittie to losse so good a kingdome for the not tolerating a messe in a cornere (if wppon that it resteth)',⁷ and James responded on 24 March, Elizabeth's dying day, that he would not 'persecute any that will be quiet and give but an outward obedience to the law'.⁸ William Wright's hopes for a *politique* form of toleration 'as the Huguenots have in France' were thus not entirely unfounded.⁹

However, the new monarch had to strike a delicate balance between endearing himself to his new Catholic subjects and proving his Reformed credentials to committed Protestants, who mostly regarded increasing toleration for England's Catholics with the greatest suspicion.¹⁰ Even though James remitted recusancy fines on a grand scale during the first few months of his reign in England, he quickly reverted to previous measures of persecution. In February 1604, Jesuits and seminaries were banned from England, the first Catholics were executed in July, and recusancy fees were re-imposed in November.¹¹ Especially the Gunpowder Plot in 1605 was grist to the mill of those who called for a more stringent suppression of Catholicism. Whereas James had magnanimously denounced suspicion as 'the Tyrants sicknesse' in his *Basilikon Doron* (1603),¹² he was forced to retract such insouciant sentiments after the discovery of the Plot in his address to Parliament on 9 November: 'For as I euer did hold Suspition to be the sicknes of

⁴ Lake and Questier, *All Hail to the Archpriest* 224–7. ⁵ Quoted in Fraser 64.

⁶ Quoted in Strype 3–2:593. ⁷ James Stuart, *Correspondence of King James VI* 56.

⁸ James Stuart, *Letters* 207.

⁹ For James' wooing of his Catholic subjects, see also Questier, *Dynastic Politics* 265–77.

¹⁰ On this point, see especially Watkins. ¹¹ Coffey 117. ¹² James Stuart, *Political Works* 42.

a Tyrant, so was I farre vpon the other extremity, as I rather contemned all aduertisements, or apprehensions of practises'.¹³ While James had claimed to content himself with 'outward obedience' before his accession to the throne, Parliament subsequently passed, with the Oath of Allegiance, a tool that forced Catholics to align their conscience with their outward self.¹⁴

Jonson's cynical depiction of a tyrannical regime corrupted by flattery and dissimulation in *Sejanus* gains its semantic polyvalence from this precarious political climate at the onset of a new government, whose religious policies must have seemed unstable and contradictory and as yet defied confident prognostications for the future fate of English Catholicism. The play can be read as an indictment of the late Queen Elizabeth's persecution of Catholics. In a complementary reading, the play can also be understood, in its protest against corruption and tyranny, as an endorsement of James' political and ethical ideals in *Basilikon Doron* (1603) and the hopes which he inspired for greater tolerance for England's Catholic communities.¹⁵ More antagonistically, however, the play could also be interpreted as a warning to the King not to repeat the mistakes of his predecessor and not to betray the principles set down in *Basilikon Doron*.¹⁶ By the time *Sejanus* was printed, the play might even have been considered to express increasing discontent with James' failure to live up to Catholic expectations. In any case, *Sejanus* portrays a state in which the principle of outward conformity, in which Catholics could realistically have placed their hopes, gives way to tyranny and an aggressive intrusion into the inward self of political dissenters.

The timing of the play's publication was certainly unfortunate. Printing was probably concluded shortly after 5 November 1605,¹⁷ coinciding with the final phase of the Gunpowder Plot. Jonson himself was implicated in the periphery of the Plot since he had attended a supper party on or around 9 October with Robert Catesby, Francis Tresham, Thomas Winter, and other members of the conspiracy.¹⁸ As William Drummond further tells us, Jonson 'was called before the Council for his *Sejanus*, and accused both of popery and treason' by Henry Howard, Earl

¹³ Ibid. 283.

¹⁴ The Oath of Allegiance and its significance for Jonson's drama will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 7.

¹⁵ For the parallels between the notions of good governance in *Sejanus* and *Basilikon Doron*, see Evans, 'Sejanus'.

¹⁶ For the rhetorical strategy of invoking *Basilikon Doron* as a means of counselling or even criticising King James, see Rickard 19–55.

¹⁷ Cain, CEWBJ 2:201. ¹⁸ Donaldson, *Ben Jonson* 217–18.

of Northampton.¹⁹ However, the exact reason for the complaint is a matter of speculation, and we do not know when exactly Jonson was called before the Council.²⁰ At any rate, the accusation seems to have had no substantial consequences – unlike *Eastward Ho!*, for which Jonson and Chapman had been imprisoned in summer 1605.

Jonson was given an opportunity to prove his loyalty immediately after the Plot had been discovered. He received a warrant from the Privy Council on 7 November to contact a certain priest, perhaps the aforementioned Thomas Wright, and to request him to appear before the Council.²¹ In his letter to Robert Cecil from 8 November, Jonson confesses his inability to find the priest in question.²² However, as Martin and Finnis observe, '[s]ubstituting professions of zeal and opinions for hard facts, the letter reveals no information about anyone' (n. pag.). The letter's actual obscurity thus stands in contradiction to Jonson's ostensible rhetoric of disclosure: 'For myself, if I had been a priest, I would have put on wings to such an occasion, and have thought it no adventure, where I might have done – besides His Majesty, and my country – all Christianity so good service'.²³ The purpose of calling the priest was, as a Catholic writer remembered sixteen years later, to convince Guy Fawkes that 'he was bound in conscience to vtter what he could of that conspiracie'.²⁴ In the end, however, the Privy Council could make do without Wright's persuasion. When Wright finally showed up, '*Fauxe* had confessed all they could wish before he could come vnto him'.²⁵

Jonson's metaphor ('put on wings to such an occasion') is presumably a deliberate allusion to a frequently quoted, Biblical condemnation of treason: 'Curse not the King, no not in thy thought, nether curse the riche in thy bed chamber: for the foule of the heauen shal cary the voice, & that

¹⁹ *Informations*, CEWBJ 5:375, ll. 251–2.

²⁰ In the light of the praise that Chapman still lavishes on Howard in his commendatory poem for the play ('In *Sejanum*', CEWBJ 2:222, ll. 144–5), Richard Dutton suggests that the accusation of 'popery and treason' was related to the printed text in the wake of the Gunpowder Plot, and not to the earlier performance of the play (*Mastering the Revels* 12).

²¹ Jonson contributed commendatory verses to the second edition of Wright's *Passions of the minde in generall* (1604). Wright, who had already converted William Alabaster in 1597, was probably also responsible for Jonson's conversion to Catholicism while he was imprisoned in Newgate in 1598. See Stroud, 'Ben Jonson and Father Thomas Wright'. On Jonson's conversion, see also Crowley. The unnamed priest in the Privy Council warrant is identified as Wright by Frances Teague. However, Patrick Martin and John Finnis suggest that Wright may only have been the second choice and that the priest whom the councillors were originally looking for was the Jesuit Thomas Strange.

²² 'Letter 9, to Robert Cecil, first Earl of Salisbury' (CEWBJ 2:655–6). The warrant itself is printed in HSS 1:203.

²³ CEWBJ 2:656, ll. 18–21. ²⁴ Broughton 59. ²⁵ *Ibid.*

which hathe wings, shal declare the matter' (Eccles. 10:2).²⁶ There is no privacy when it comes to treason, not even freedom of thought. Jonson's willingness to 'put on wings' to such an occasion, that is, the confession of Guy Fawkes, shows him to be complicit in the government's invasion into the subjects' inner lives – at least in the case of treason. At the same time, however, the letter can be read as the deliberate exercise in obfuscation of a fence-sitter with divided loyalties. Jonson's case is thus symptomatic of a situation in which many Catholic loyalists found themselves in the heated climate of persecution, conspiracy, and precarious prospects for toleration during the transition from Tudor to Jacobean rule.²⁷

Jonson's attempt to position himself as a loyal subject of the Crown in the wake of the Gunpowder Plot is undermined by *Sejanus*, which offers a far more cynical assessment of treason charges as a political tool of persecution. In the 'argument', which was perhaps inserted only after the discovery of the Gunpowder Plot,²⁸ Jonson advertises *Sejanus* 'as a mark of terror to all traitors and treasons, to show how just the heavens are in pouring and thundering down a weighty vengeance on their unnatural intents'.²⁹ However, while such protestations might put Jonson on the right side of history, the sentiment is patently absurd in the light of the much murkier politics of the play. In *Sejanus*, treason is '[t]he complement of all accusings . . . [t]hat / Will hit, when all else fails' (4.343–4),³⁰ and such observations closely mirror the polemical writings of Catholic polemicists from the two previous decades. For instance, in his reply to Cecil's *Execution of Justice in England*, William Allen observes that Catholics are 'condemned and put to death ether without al lawe, or els onelie vpon new lawes by which matter of religion is made treason'.³¹ Similarly, Thomas Fitzherbert, who had been tenuously implicated in the Squire Plot in 1598, generalises in almost Foxean fashion that 'all persecutours haue sought to couer their persecutions with the cloke of treason'.³² Jonson's play reproduces such complaints and can therefore, like *Sir John Oldcastle*, be read as an oppositional play to the extent that it critically interrogates discourses of treason and their political instrumentalisation by a persecutory regime.

²⁶ The Biblical verse is prominently cited in *The Book of Homilies*, in 'An exhortation to obedience' (*Certaine sermons* S2r–v) in the first volume as well as the 'Homilee agaynst disobedience and wylful rebellion', which had been added to the second edition (1571) of the second volume after the Northern Rebellion (*Second Tome of Homilies* 585).

²⁷ For Jonson's difficult navigation of his conflicts of loyalty as a Catholic more generally, see Donaldson, *Jonson's Magic Houses* 47–65. For a more literary perspective on the dynamics of concealment and revelation in Jonson's middle plays, see Slights.

²⁸ Cain, 'Jonson's Humanist Tragedies' 171. ²⁹ CEWBJ 2:229, ll. 30–3. ³⁰ *Ibid.* 2:338.

³¹ Allen, *Modest defence* Bv. ³² Fitzherbert, 'Apology' F2v.

While recent critics have mostly refrained from drawing one-to-one parallels between the play's characters and historical persons, *Sejanus* may nonetheless deliberately offer what Matthew H. Wikander has called 'flashes of recognition' between Tiberius and Elizabeth or James,³³ between the fall of Sejanus or Germanicus and the Earl of Essex, between Agrippina and Mary Stuart, or between the treason trial of Silius and that of Walter Raleigh. However, some of these parallels are plurivalent, difficult to sustain consistently, and sometimes mutually exclusive.³⁴ Rather than focusing on concrete historical events and persons, my historicist reading of *Sejanus* will therefore be grounded in intellectual history and the play's treatment of the rhetorical, ethical, and political discourses that had gained considerable urgency during the late sixteenth-century persecution of English Catholics and informed the hopes and fears of Catholics as they looked into an uncertain future.³⁵

Parrhesia: Secrecy and the Rhetoric of Free Speech

Paradoxically, the persecuted Germanicans discuss the issue of dissimulation primarily in relation to the issue of free speech. Although it has been argued that '[f]or Jonson such freedom is the first essential of a healthy state',³⁶ its rhetorical premises have received remarkably little attention in scholarship on *Sejanus*. I suggest that the Germanicans' disagreement on the ethics of dissimulation is owed to differing interpretations of *parrhesia*, the rhetorical figure of free speech. Initially, the Germanicans pride themselves on their honesty, which sets them apart from a court infested with flattery and dissimulation. As one of them, Sabinus, declares at the beginning of the play, we 'have no shift of faces, no cleft tongues' (1.7–9), 'we burn with no black secrets' (1.15).³⁷ Agrippina, the widow of Germanicus, similarly insists that she has nothing to hide: 'had Sejanus both his ears as long / As to my inmost closet, I would hate / To whisper any thought' (2.453–5).³⁸ Already by act 2, however, most of the Germanicans have adapted to the world of courtly intrigue and espionage. As one of Sejanus' spies notes: 'They all lock up themselves a'late, / Or talk in character. I have not seen / A company so

³³ Wikander, "Queasy to Be Touched" 346.

³⁴ See *ibid.* Convincing arguments for the deliberate complication of allegorical interpretations in *Sejanus*, perhaps as a strategy of self-protection on Jonson's part, are also made in Lake, 'From *Leicester His Commonwealth*' 130–3; Cain, 'Jonson's Humanist Tragedies' 174–5.

³⁵ For the critical consensus on a Catholic context for the play, see, for example, Lenthe; Lake, 'From *Leicester His Commonwealth*'. See also Cain, CEWBJ 2:202–6; Butler, 'Ben Jonson's Catholicism' 199–201; Donaldson, *Ben Jonson* 186–92; Miola 102; Kelly, 'Ben Jonson's Politics' 209–10.

³⁶ Cain, 'Jonson's Humanist Tragedies' 176. ³⁷ CEWBJ 2:236. ³⁸ *Ibid.* 2:287–8.

changed' (2.333–5).³⁹ It is under the pressure of constant surveillance that the Germanicans are driven to secrecy in the first place. They are 'grown exceeding circumspect and wary' (2.405), their voices are '[h]ushed' and '[d]rowned in their bellies' (4.351–2).⁴⁰

This conflict between an ideal of frankness and honesty on the one hand and the political necessity for secrecy on the other is the subject of disagreement among the Germanicans themselves and manifests itself in a clash of different rhetorical conceptions of free speech. This becomes explicit for the first time in act 2, when the Germanican Silius tells Agrippina that his wife, Sosia, 'doth owe Your Grace / An honest but unprofitable love' (2.432–3).⁴¹ Distinguishing between a 'moral' and a 'political sense' (2.435),⁴² Silius elaborates:

I meant, as she [i.e. Sosia] is bold, and free of speech,
Earnest to utter what her zealous thought
Travails withal, in honour of your house;
Which act, as it is simply born in her,
Partakes of love and honesty, but may,
By th'over-often and unseasoned use,
turn to your loss and danger – for your state
Is waited on by envies, as by eyes;
And every second guest your tables take
Is a fee'd spy, t'observe who goes, who comes,
What conference you have, with whom, where, when;
What the discourse is, what the looks, the thoughts
Of every person there, they do extract,
And make into a substance.⁴³

(2.436–49)

Under the intense scrutiny of inimical spies, there is such a thing as 'over-often and unseasoned' honesty, which appears to be in conflict with Sosia's otherwise laudable habit of being 'bold, and free of speech'. Jonson thus draws attention to necessary qualifications of free speech under the conditions of persecution, a concern that is also apparent in early modern treatises on rhetoric.

According to the *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, '[i]t is Frankness of speech [*licentia*] when, talking before those to whom we owe reverence or fear, we yet exercise our right to speak out, because we seem justified in reprehending them, or persons dear to them, for some fault' (4.36).⁴⁴ In his frequently reprinted *Art of Rhetorique* (1553), Thomas Wilson defines *parrhesia* similarly: 'Freenesse of speech, is when we speake boldly

³⁹ Ibid. 2:282. ⁴⁰ Ibid. 2:285, 339. ⁴¹ Ibid. 2:286. ⁴² Ibid. ⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ On *parrhesia* in classical rhetoric and its early modern reception, see Colclough, especially ch. 1.

and without feare, euen to the proudest of them, whatsoever we please or haue list to speake'.⁴⁵ However, Wilson had to learn that such *parrhesia* is difficult to sustain in an age of religious persecution. In the prologue to the second edition of his *Art of Rhetorique* (1560), the later privy counsellor tells us that in his exile during the reign of the Catholic Queen Mary, he was brought to trial in Rome on charges of heresy.⁴⁶ As Wilson reports, 'I tooke such courage, and was so bolde, that the Iudges then did much maruaile at my stoutnesse'.⁴⁷ Still, he soon realised that inconsiderate *parrhesia* undermined his position: '[My judges] told me plainly, that I was in farther perill, then wherof I was aware, and sought thereupon to take aduantage of my words, and to bring me in daunger by all meanes possible'.⁴⁸ *Parrhesia* should therefore by no means be confused with recklessness: 'I was as ware as I could bee, not to vtter any thing for mine owne harme, for feare I shoulde come in their daunger. For then either should I haue dyed, or else haue denyed both openly and shamefully, the knowne trueth of Christ and his Gospell'.⁴⁹ As Wilson makes clear, there are grey areas between complete sincerity and denying Christ. The parrhesiastic imperative to confess Christ openly may need to be tempered with prudential considerations.

Parrhesia is not simply a stylistic device; it is also a type of communication with a specific political function. In his essay on 'How to Tell a Flatterer From a Friend', Plutarch associates *parrhesia* with honest advice as opposed to flattery. As a means of speaking truth to power, it became a central concept for early modern understandings of free speech. In *Sejanus*, it is Arruntius who most consciously adopts the role of the Plutarchian *parrhesiastes*.⁵⁰ When Arruntius fantasises about dismembering Sejanus,

⁴⁵ Wilson, *Art of Rhetorique* 203.

⁴⁶ Ibid. A4v. Wilson, who would later demonstrate his own officiousness in interrogating Catholics, had first joined the English community at the University of Padua and subsequently moved to Rome on legal business. In 1558, Wilson was denounced to the Inquisition as a heretic, possibly by Cardinal Reginald Pole, and was tortured and imprisoned until he escaped when a Roman crowd burnt down the prison on via Ripetta after the death of Paul IV on 18 August 1559. See Doran and Woolfson.

⁴⁷ Wilson, *Art of Rhetorique* A5r. ⁴⁸ Ibid. A5r. ⁴⁹ Ibid. A5r.

⁵⁰ Compare with Ceron. For the question of whether Arruntius' cynical running commentary is indeed an instance of *parrhesia* or rather a series of asides, and the manner in which modern editions have dealt with this question, see Geng. As Geng concludes, the tendency of modern editors to increase the number of asides is warranted neither by the evidence of the quarto or folio edition of the play nor by the reaction of other characters to Arruntius' loose tongue, as the following discussion of Arruntius will demonstrate as well. In "[P]lain and passive fortitude", Smith goes even further and argues that Arruntius' verbal interventions are crucial to the formation of a discourse of resistance in the play.

Sabinus warns him: 'You are observed, Arruntius' (1.258), to which the latter simply replies: 'Death! I dare tell him so, and all his spies' (1.259).⁵¹ Friends repeatedly tell Arruntius to stop talking (1.541, 1.547, 4.435),⁵² but even the spies who are set on him realise that he simply cannot be bothered: 'And yet Arruntius / Cannot contain himself' (2.406–7).⁵³ When he decides to denounce the flattering 'palace-rats' (1.427) at the court to Tiberius,⁵⁴ Sabinus urges caution in the following terms:

Stay, Arruntius,
We must abide our opportunity,
And practise what is fit, as what is needful.
It is not safe t'enforce a sovereign's ear;
Princes hear well, if they at all will hear.⁵⁵ (1.430–4)

Unlike Arruntius, Sabinus is aware of the importance of *decorum*, to 'practise what is fit' and to choose the right moment (*kairos*) in giving counsel. *Parrhesia* is thus not simply, as Wilson puts it, liberty to speak 'whatsoever we please or haue list to speake'.⁵⁶ When *decorum* is disregarded, Plutarch warns, *parrhesia* is bound to backfire: 'Failure to observe the proper occasion is in any case exceedingly harmful, but particularly when frankness is concerned it destroys its profitableness'.⁵⁷ In his discussion of *parrhesia* in *The garden of eloquence* (1577), Henry Peacham similarly warns that 'great warinesse must be vsed, least much boldnesse bringeth offence. And therefore the tyme, the place, and chiefly the persons, ought wel to be considered of'.⁵⁸ Jonson too later dealt with *parrhesia* in *Discoveries*, where he reproduces some of its classical qualifications. One should speak to a prince in a manner 'free from flattery or empire', but, like Plutarch,⁵⁹ Jonson couples *parrhesia* with *modestia*.⁶⁰ Arruntius, however, refuses to acknowledge that *parrhesia* is not simply sincere or unregulated speech but subject to rhetorical rules and conventions, if it is to have any persuasive effect at all.

The inefficiency of inconsiderate *parrhesia* is powerfully brought home in the fabricated treason trial of Silius, who uses the platform of the trial in order to castigate the Emperor's corruption and tyranny. Silius tells Tiberius that 'thy fraud is worse than violence' (3.209) and denounces the Emperor's 'Malicious and manifold applying, / Foul wrestling, and impossible construction' of the law (3.228–9).⁶¹ But the prosecutor Afer gains the upper hand by dismissing this lack of civility as evidence for

⁵¹ CEWBJ 2:250. ⁵² Ibid. 2:264, 264, 343. ⁵³ Ibid. 2:285. ⁵⁴ Ibid. 2:259. ⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Wilson, *Art of Rhetorique* 203. ⁵⁷ Plutarch, *Moralia* 68D. ⁵⁸ Peacham M3r.

⁵⁹ CEWBJ 7:505, l. 78. Plutarch *Moralia* 66E. ⁶⁰ CEWBJ 7:505, ll. 77–8. ⁶¹ Ibid. 2:300.

Silius' agitated state of mind: 'He raves, he raves' (3.230).⁶² Silius' protest is nothing but 'the common customs of thy blood / When it is high with wine, as now with rage' (3.270–1).⁶³ Finally, Silius stabs himself in a last attempt 'to mock Tiberius' tyranny' (3.338),⁶⁴ but even this last act of resistance proves a rhetorical failure, which inadvertently gives the Emperor the upper hand in interpreting the trial:

We are not pleased in this sad accident,
That thus hath stalled and abused our mercy,
Intended to preserve thee, noble Roman,
And to prevent thy hopes.⁶⁵ (3.344–7)

Instead of defying the Emperor with his suicide, Silius saves Tiberius the labour of having to bring the farcical treason trial to its bitter conclusion. The quick-witted Tiberius seizes the occasion to uphold a fiction of paternal care and benevolence by feigning sympathy and regret. Tiberius clearly imitates Caesar's reaction to Cato's death in Utica. According to Plutarch, Caesar said upon hearing the news of Cato's suicide: 'O Cato, I begrudge thee thy death; for thou didst begrudge me the sparing of thy life'.⁶⁶ The parallel between Cato and Silius is intriguing, not least because Cato offers a prominent precedent for the dangers of intemperate *parrhesia* and was discussed as such also in sixteenth-century England.

Cato's rigid moralism and failure to accommodate his rhetoric to the circumstances at hand were already controversial in antiquity. Cicero, who acquiesced with Caesar's regime and defended his refusal to imitate Cato's 'martyrdom for the Republic' in *De officiis* (see English translation *On Duties*, 1.31), observes in his *Letters to Atticus* that Cato is, as the early modern proverb goes, so good that he is good for nothing: 'The fact remains that with all his patriotism and integrity he is sometimes a political liability. He speaks in the Senate as though he were living in Plato's Republic instead of Romulus' cesspool'.⁶⁷ The contrast between Cicero's political and rhetorical flexibility and Cato's refusal to compromise continued to be cited throughout the sixteenth century. Jonson's contemporary Francis Bacon, for instance, similarly locates Cato's political failure in his refusal to temper *parrhesia* with

⁶² Ibid. 2:301. ⁶³ Ibid. 2:302. ⁶⁴ Ibid. 2:305. ⁶⁵ Ibid. 2:305–6.

⁶⁶ Plutarch, *Lives* 8:72. Chapman, who possibly collaborated with Jonson on *Sejanus*, cited this remark in his own tragedy *Caesar and Pompey*: 'O Cato, I enuy thy death, since thou / Enuedst my glory to preserue thy life' (Kiv).

⁶⁷ Cicero, *Letters to Atticus* 21.8.

due regard to the given circumstances. In the chapter on ‘Cassandra sive Parrhesia’ in his mythographic study *De sapientia veterum* (1609), he cites Cicero’s observation in the *Letters to Atticus* concerning Cato as an example of the failed *parrhesiastes*. Bacon may well have gleaned the example of Cato from Lipsius, who cites the same Ciceronian passage in his *Politicorum sive civilis doctrinae libri sex* when he criticises political advisers who are unwilling to use deceit.⁶⁸ In line with Lipsius, Bacon explains that the fable of the Trojan prophetess, who was condemned to tell the truth but never to be believed, ‘seemes to intimate the vnprofitable liberty of vntimely admonitions and counselles’.⁶⁹ According to Bacon, inept counsellors cannot discern ‘the due times when to speake and when to be silent . . . [I]n all their endeouours either of perswasion or perforce, they auaille nothing’.⁷⁰ In *Sejanus*, we might conclude, Silius pulls off a classic Cato – his resistance and suicide are morally admirable, but politically pointless. By unflinchingly speaking truth to power, Silius does not gain the upper hand but, on the contrary, yields control over the moral and political significance of his final acts and words to the Emperor.

Arruntius suffers from the same misunderstanding of free speech. In fact, he seems hostile to the very idea of rhetoric, as when he cannot think of a better insult for Sejanus’ henchman Afer than to call him an ‘orator’, who ‘hath phrases, figures, and fine flowers / To strew his rhetoric with’ (2.418–20).⁷¹ In his insistence on frankness, however, Arruntius fails to recognise that there is such a thing as a *rhetoric* of free speech, which may be nothing else but a studied pose of authenticity, carefully designed to achieve specific rhetorical effects. Quintilian points out that *parrhesia* would not be a figure of speech if it were nothing else but unregulated, sincere speech. Not only is *parrhesia* subject to *decorum*, it can also be ‘feigned and artificially produced’, and ‘flattery is often concealed under this cover’.⁷² In the *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, *parrhesia* likewise does not preclude manipulation. *Parrhesia* may be ‘mitigated by praise’, and it can even be a form of ‘pretence’, that is, if it merely ‘assumes the guise of Frank Speech and is of itself agreeable to the hearer’s frame of mind’.⁷³ As the classical teachers of rhetoric as well as Jonson and his contemporaries were well aware, truth cannot do without rhetoric, and free speech may even be *nothing else* but rhetoric.

⁶⁸ Lipsius, *Sixte bookes [Politicorum sive civilis doctrinae libri sex]* 112.

⁶⁹ Bacon, *De sapientia veterum* 2. ⁷⁰ *Ibid.* 3. ⁷¹ CEWBJ 2:286. ⁷² Quintilian 9.27–8.

⁷³ *Rhetorica ad Herennium* 4.37.

Free speech can thus be a form of dissimulation and a political instrument in its own right, not only for the adviser but also for the ruler. Bacon, for instance, notes in his essay 'Of Simulation and Dissimulation' that 'the ablest Men, that ever were, have had all an Opennesse, and Francknesse of dealing' that allowed them to cover their dissimulation all the more efficiently because 'the former Opinion, spread abroad of their good Faith, and Clearnesse of dealing, made them almost Invisible'.⁷⁴ In other words, there is no better camouflage for dissimulation than cultivating a reputation of sincerity. Such false frankness can even serve 'the better to discover the Minde of another. For to him that opens himselfe, Men will hardly shew themselves adverse; but will (faire) let him goe on, and turne their Freedome of Speech, to Freedome of thought'.⁷⁵ According to Tacitus, this was the strategy that Tiberius pursued with his initial, pseudo-republican deference to the senate: 'It was realized later that his coyness had been assumed with the further object of gaining an insight into the feelings of the aristocracy: for all the while he was distorting words and looks into crimes and storing them in his memory'.⁷⁶ Dissimulation thus again serves not only to conceal one's intentions but also to reveal the intentions of others. And, significantly, such dissimulation works best, as Bacon emphasises, if it operates under the guise of openness and frankness.

In Jonson's play, similar tactics are also employed by informers and agents provocateurs such as Latiaris, who succeeds in ensnaring the otherwise discreet Sabinus with a supposedly daring appeal to republican values and a parrhesiastic critique of Tiberius and Sejanus (4.115–217).⁷⁷ However, Bacon further argues in his essay that Tiberius committed a fatal error in making dissimulation a habit and therefore acquired a reputation for duplicity, which 'is a Hinderance, and a Poorenesse'.⁷⁸ In *Sejanus*, Tiberius is likewise past deceiving anybody with his posture of republican public-spiritedness. Nonetheless, Jonson's play shows how a tyrannical regime may deceptively use free speech for the purpose of suppressing dissent.

In addition, the play also offers a lucid analysis of how tyrants may instrumentalise the free speech of their critics and incorporate it into their own ideological fictions. Even though Arruntius never wonders what the effects of his parrhesiastic speech may be, just as he never wonders why he is

⁷⁴ OFB 15:20. ⁷⁵ OFB 15:22.

⁷⁶ Tacitus 1.7. Tacitus further singles out as exemplary Tiberius' treatment of the traitor Libo Drusus: 'There was no estrangement on his brow, no hint of asperity in his speech: he had buried his anger far too deep. He could have checked every word and action of Libo: he preferred, however, to know them' (*Annals* 2.28).

⁷⁷ CEWBJ 2:328–32. ⁷⁸ OFB 15:20.

not dragged off-stage like his fellow-Germanicans, his words are not without consequences. As it turns out, Arruntius is deliberately left untouched. After the show trials in act 3, Sejanus advises Tiberius as follows:

By any means preserve him. His frank tongue,
 Being lent the reins, will take away all thought
 Of malice in your course against the rest.
 We must keep him to stalk with.⁷⁹ (3.498–501)

If Arruntius is oblivious to the effects of his ‘frank tongue’, others are not. Letting him speak out lends Tiberius’ regime a veneer of impartiality and liberty. Arruntius thus becomes an unwitting collaborator, the stalking horse of a mendacious and cynical regime of terror. As in the case of Silius, Arruntius’ disregard of rhetorical conventions is therefore not empowering but rather amounts to a gratuitous renunciation of control over the meaning and impact of his own words. In *Sejanus*, free speech is incorporated into the machinations of the ruling clique, who enlist Arruntius’ truth in the service of a political fiction of toleration in an exemplary instance of what Stephen Greenblatt has called containment of subversion.⁸⁰

Upholding an illusion of free speech and liberty might even be characterised as the hallmark of Tiberius’ political style. With regard to the libels written against him, Tiberius shows himself lenient and argues that they ‘will, neglected, find their own grave quickly, whereas too sensibly acknowledged, it would make their obloquy ours. Nor do we desire their authors, though found, be censured, since in a free state (as ours) all men ought to enjoy both their minds and tongues free’ (5.552–6).⁸¹ Tiberius thus fashions his political image as a generous ruler who is above the animosities of his petty detractors in a manner that is disconcertingly close to Jonson’s actual literary-political ideals.⁸² However, the sheer scope of Tiberius’ hypocrisy is evident from the fact that he is parroting an argument for free speech made by the historian Cordus, whom Tiberius and Sejanus had previously brought to trial on account of treasonous slander.⁸³ Cordus had defended his history of the

⁷⁹ CEWBJ 2:312. ⁸⁰ Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations* 21–65. ⁸¹ CEWBJ 2:376.

⁸² For the same argumentation, see, for example, Jonson’s epigram 30, ‘To Person Guilty’: ‘Guilty, be wise; and though thou know’st the cries / Be thine I tax, yet do not own my rhymes: / ’Twere madness in thee to betray thy fame / And person to the world, ere I thy name’ (CEWBJ 5:127, ll. 1–4). See also ‘The Epistle’ to *Volpone*, CEWBJ 3:29, ll. 42–5; *Discoveries*, CEWBJ 7:577–8, ll. 1634–63.

⁸³ For the technical aspects of the charge against Cordus, an application of the *lex maiestatis* to slanderous writing, which was punished by burning the books in question, see McHugh 393–4. Cordus’ final fate is not quite clear. According to Tacitus, he starved himself to death (4.34), and Dio Cassius reports that he was forced to commit suicide (57.24.2). Jonson does not pursue his career any further than his trial.

downfall of the Republic by pointing out that Tiberius' predecessor Augustus had tolerated even the railing epigrams of Bibaculus and Catullus: 'for such obloquies, / If they despised be, they die suppressed, / But if with rage acknowledged, they are confessed' (3.439–41).⁸⁴ Even though Cordus is evidently excluded from Tiberius' wish that 'all men ought to enjoy both their minds and tongues free', his arguments nonetheless resurface in Tiberius' projection of his own image as a liberal and tolerant ruler. Notably, the close argumentative parallels, that is, the merits of ignoring slander as means of proving one's innocence, and verbal parallels ('obloquy', 'acknowledge') between Tiberius and Cordus are not to be found in the sources.⁸⁵ Jonson thus consciously highlights the Emperor's hypocritical appropriation of the rhetoric of free speech of his political enemies for his own mendacious purposes.

To be sure, in line with Bacon's assessment of Tiberius' unseasoned use of dissimulation, the Emperor's claim to *parrhesia* eventually degenerates into a perfectly transparent façade in Jonson's play. However, the fact that Tiberius' ideological fictions remain largely unchallenged attests all the more impressively to the sway which the Emperor holds over his subjects. This fiction of free speech is also maintained when the Senate session in act 5 is opened by the consul Memmius Regulus with the following appeal: 'And thou, Apollo, in whose holy house / We here are met, inspire us all with truth, / And liberty of censure, to our thought' (5.523–5).⁸⁶ However, the truth to be determined in that session, namely, that Sejanus is a traitor to the state, is not inspired by Apollo but by the well-timed entry of guards (5.612) and a gentle nudge in the right direction by Macro, the Emperor's new favourite (5.663–6).⁸⁷

⁸⁴ CEWBJ 2:310.

⁸⁵ The letter which in Jonson's play contains Tiberius' advocacy of free speech is not recorded in the *Annals*, where it would have been part of the lost sections from books 5 and 6. Dio Cassius' summary of the letter (58.10.1–5) does not mention free speech, which suggests that Jonson himself is responsible for the addition of the issue of free speech. Next to the second sentence of Tiberius' argument ('Nor do we desire their authors, though found, be censured, since in a free state (as ours) all men ought to enjoy both their minds and tongues free'), Jonson provides a marginal reference to chapter 28 of Suetonius' biography of Tiberius, according to which Tiberius claimed that 'in a free country there should be free speech and free thought' (Suetonius, 'Tiberius', *Lives of the Caesars* 28). In Suetonius, however, the principle is not related to the letter which Tiberius sent to the Senate. Moreover, Jonson himself has added the first sentence ('[libels] neglected, find their own grave quickly whereas too sensibly acknowledged, it would make their obloquy ours'), which connects Tiberius' argument to Cordus in the first place and thus highlights the Emperor's hypocrisy.

⁸⁶ CEWBJ 2:375.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.* 2:379, 381. Blair Worden (85–6) has suggested that Jonson's cynical portrayal of the Senate's deliberations might be related to the endeavours in the 1590s to restrict free speech in parliament, on which I have already touched in Chapter 3. In addition, questions on the status of free speech were also pressing in James' first parliament (1604–10). See Colclough 138–59.

As Jonson shows in *Sejanus*, *parrhesia* is by no means simply to be equated with honesty or straightforwardly speaking truth to power. As a rhetorical figure, it is subject to *decorum*, and it is to be tempered according to the circumstances at hand in order to achieve the desired rhetorical effects. As such, it provides a rationale for compromises between an ideal of honesty and openness on the one hand and political prudence on the other. *Parrhesia* can even be instrumentalised by repressive regimes in order to uphold a political fiction of toleration. However, Jonson also draws on other resources in his reflections on dissimulation. Especially neo-Stoicist political theory and moral philosophy offer justifications of dissimulation that have not yet been fully recognised in scholarship on *Sejanus* and its religious politics.

The Besieged Self: *Constantia* and Dissimulation

Sejanus can be read as a critical reflection on neo-Stoicist moral philosophy and political thought as represented by Justus Lipsius and his case for a *politique* form of toleration for private dissent. However, as I argue in the following, Tiberius and Sejanus routinely flout Lipsian principles of statecraft and thus forestall the possibility of a life of Stoicist self-sufficiency and inward sovereignty, which Lipsius recommends as a remedy against the calamities of civil war and tyranny. Like the protagonist of *Sir Thomas More*, some of the Germanicans decide to retreat from public life in order to save themselves, as Jonson highlights in the final debate between Arruntius and Lepidus, ‘almost all the few / Left to be honest in these impious times’ (4.278–9).⁸⁸ When Arruntius asks Lepidus what arts have preserved him untouched to this point, the latter replies:

Arts, Arruntius?
None but the plain and passive fortitude
To suffer and be silent; never stretch
These arms against the torrent; live at home,
With my own thoughts, and innocence about me,
Not tempting the wolf’s jaws: these are my arts.⁸⁹ (4.293–8)

With his insistence on ‘plain and passive fortitude’ and his retreat into the privacy of his own mind, Lepidus taps into neo-Stoicist ideas and values.⁹⁰

⁸⁸ CEWBJ 2:335. ⁸⁹ Ibid. 2:336.

⁹⁰ Lepidus’ Stoicism has been noticed, for example by Burgess, “Historical Turn” 39–43, and Geng 128, but its full political implications with regard to *politique* approaches to religious toleration have not yet been explored. For a general overview of the Stoicist conception of constancy and its sixteenth-century reception, which will be the focus of my discussion, see Lagrée.

Such political quietism, as propagated by Guillaume du Vair, Michel de Montaigne, and Justus Lipsius, had become increasingly attractive when civil society and political institutions were brought to the brink of collapse in the French and Dutch civil wars. As has been less noticed, the neo-Stoicist virtue of constancy also offered a justification of Nicodemism with its distinction between inward sovereignty and outward conformity.⁹¹ However, Jonson offers a pessimistic appraisal of the viability of such a distinction under a persecutory regime that does not acknowledge any distinction between outward conformity and inward dissent.

The neo-Stoicist conception of constancy is predicated on a sharp division between the external blows of fortune and the onslaught of the passions on the one hand and what Lepidus calls ‘my own thoughts, and innocence about me’, the inviolable, inward realm of virtue, on the other. In *De constantia sapientis*, for instance, Seneca describes the virtue of the wise man as an impregnable fortress: ‘The walls which guard the wise man are safe from both flame and assault, they provide no means of entrance, – are lofty, impregnable, godlike.’⁹² True liberty accordingly consists in ‘having a mind . . . that separates itself from all external things’.⁹³ This radical separation between inwardness and outwardness fell on fertile ground during the religious persecutions and civil wars of the sixteenth century. A case in point is Justus Lipsius’ neo-Stoicist bestseller *De constantia in publicis malis* (1584), which he had written against the backdrop of the Eighty Years’ War. In this short treatise in dialogue form, Lipsius defines constancy as ‘*an upright and unmoved vigor of mind that is neither uplifted nor cast down by outward or chance occurrences*’.⁹⁴ Only if one has recognised that desire and delight are based on false goods and that fear and sorrow are based on false evils is one ‘truly a king, truly free . . . subject to God only, exempt from the yoke of Feeling and Fortune’.⁹⁵ Like Seneca, Lipsius envisages such inward integrity metaphorically in terms of armour and military fortification. In the dialogue, the youthful (and fictionalised) Lipsius laments that ‘[t]here is no steel around my heart’,⁹⁶ and his interlocutor, Charles Langius, uses the same language with regard to the passions when he advises him to ‘erect palisades and strongholds, and thus fortified [to] repulse the assaults of desire’.⁹⁷ Importantly, Stoicist constancy is thus a form of detachment and not a form of allegiance to any institutional, political, or social entity.⁹⁸ The Stoicist self is not a relational category that derives its identity from the various

⁹¹ For an exception, see Zagorin 123. ⁹² Seneca, *Moral Essays* 6.8. ⁹³ *Ibid.* 19.2.

⁹⁴ Lipsius, *Concerning Constancy [De constantia]* 1.4. ⁹⁵ *Ibid.* 1.6. ⁹⁶ *Ibid.* 1.1. ⁹⁷ *Ibid.* 1.3.

⁹⁸ Compare with Langius’ deconstruction of patriotic sentiment and public duty as a hypocritical cover for purely personal interests (1.8–11).

social structures in which it is embedded. On the contrary, it is maintained, like a military fortress, *despite* social and political pressures and obligations.

The Stoicist conception of constancy is thus not simply the constancy of a martyr but could also license dissimulation. For instance, King James protests in *Basilikon Doron* that ‘trew Constancie’ has nothing to do with ‘that Stoicke insensible stupiditie, wherewith many in our dayes, preassing to winne honour, in imitating that ancient sect, by their inconstant behauour in their owne liues, belie their profession’.⁹⁹ The Edinburgh edition of *Basilikon Doron* from 1599 even specifies its target as ‘that proud inconstant LIPSIVS’, the period’s most notorious serial convert, and ‘his Constantia’.¹⁰⁰ Born a Catholic, Lipsius changed his faith with each of his academic advancements. In Lutheran Jena and Calvinist Leiden, he conformed to the local confession, only to complete the circle on the occasion of his return to Catholic Louvain.¹⁰¹ The notion of constancy as a form of detachment that licenses dissimulation is also apparent in Lipsius’ discussion of persecution in *De constantia*. There, Lipsius’ interlocutor Langius denies that there can be such a thing as mental persecution (*interna oppressio*) in the first place:

It seems to me that someone who thinks that the mind can be confined or constrained is ignorant of himself and of the mind’s heavenly nature. No external force will ever make you will what you don’t will, or think what you don’t think . . . A tyrant can free it from the body, not dissolve the nature of the mind itself, which is pure, eternal, and fiery; which disdains every violent and external influence. But still, you may say, the mind cannot express its thought. So be it, but reins are placed on your tongue, then, not on your mind, and not on your judgments, but on your actions. (2.25)

Langius has clearly no qualms about differing in one’s heart and tongue under a tyrannical regime or during civil wars. His argument sounds remarkably similar to Lipsius’ justification of Nicodemism in *Politicorum sive civilis doctrinae libri sex*, which I have already discussed in the Introduction to this book. The difference is that in *De constantia* Lipsius addresses the question of Nicodemism from the point of view of the subject rather than the magistrate, and from an ethical rather than a political perspective. Still, the same anthropological principle underlies Lipsius’ argumentation in both cases, namely, the impossibility of constraining the mind to believe what it does not want to believe.¹⁰²

⁹⁹ James Stuart, *Political Works* 41–2. ¹⁰⁰ James Stuart, *Basilikon Doron* 117.

¹⁰¹ On Lipsius’ conversions, especially on the occasion of his return to Louvain, see Machielsen, ‘Friendship and Religion’.

¹⁰² Lipsius’ account is consistent with a Christian tradition on the impossibility of constraining the will in matters of faith, which he cites explicitly in *Sixte bookes [Politicorum sive civilis doctrinae libri sex]*

Lipsius was not alone in reviving Stoicist constancy in an age of religious strife and persecution. In his essay 'On Habit', Montaigne likewise licenses such a disjunction between inwardness and outwardness when he argues that 'it is his soul that a wise man should withdraw from the crowd, maintaining its power and freedom freely to make judgements, whilst externally accepting all received forms and fashions'.¹⁰³ Such words are particularly poignant when considering that Montaigne wrote the essay in the tumultuous aftermath of the St Bartholomew's Day Massacre.¹⁰⁴ In effect, Montaigne makes a case for religious dissimulation when he declares that even though '[t]he government of a community' may have a rightful claim on 'our actions, efforts, wealth and life itself', it 'has no right to our thoughts'.¹⁰⁵ In his essay 'On Constancy', Montaigne further spells out the Nicodemite potential of Stoicist constancy: 'Resolution and constancy do not lay down as a law that we may not protect ourselves, as far as it lies in our power to do so, from the ills and misfortunes which threaten us'.¹⁰⁶ Even more, 'all honourable means of protecting oneself from evils are not only licit: they are laudable'.¹⁰⁷ Neo-Stoicist constancy does not have to be crowned with martyrdom or a noble suicide in the style of Cato (or, in the case of *Sejanus*, Silius), but is compatible with dissimulation as a means of avoiding persecution.¹⁰⁸

in order to make the same point, and which I have already discussed in the Introduction. However, the Stoics also stressed that the ability to grant or withhold assent cannot be constrained by anyone else (Taylor, *Sources of the Self* 137). A noteworthy parallel to Lipsius' inward freedom is offered, for instance, in Epictetus' imagined confrontation between the tyrant and the Stoic sage: "Tell your secrets". I say not a word; for this is under my control. "I will fetter you". What is that you say, man? fetter *me*? My leg you will fetter, but my moral purpose [*prohairesis*] not even Zeus himself has power to overcome' (1.1.23–4).

¹⁰³ Montaigne, *Essays* 133. ¹⁰⁴ Skinner 2:281.

¹⁰⁵ Montaigne, *Essays* 133. For the same argument, see Charron, *De la sagesse* (1601), book 2, ch. 2. The scepticist bent of both Montaigne and Charron may be at odds with the systematic ambitions of neo-Stoicism, but the quietism of Pyrrhonic scepticism likewise supports an agenda of outward conformity. Despite – or rather because of – his corrosive attack on all dogmatic certainties, Sextus Empiricus recommends 'a life conformable to the customs of our country and its laws and institutions' (*Outlines* 8).

¹⁰⁶ Montaigne, *Essays* 47. ¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁸ For the central role of self-preservation in Stoicist ethics (of which suicide can, under certain conditions, paradoxically be an instance), see Sellars 107–9. Furthermore, Cato's example was by no means uncontroversial. Already Augustine had criticised Cato's suicide as a failure even in Stoicist terms since it was motivated not by 'self-respect guarding against dishonour, but weakness unable to bear adversity' (*City of God* 1.23). John Donne reproduces the argumentation in one of his *Paradoxes and Problems*, 'That only Cowards dare dye' (*Selected Prose* 15), as does Shakespeare's Brutus in *Julius Caesar*: 'I do find it cowardly and vile, / For fear of what might fall, so to prevent / The time of life' (5.1.103–5). Montaigne is less harsh, but likewise questions the exemplary character of Cato's suicide in his essay 'On Restraining Your Will' by characterising it as an exceptional course of action that is not necessarily to be imitated: 'Cato gave up for his country the most noble life there ever was; little men like us should flee farther from the storm; we should see that there are no pains to feel, no pains to endure, dodging blows, not parrying them' (*Essays* 1148).

Jonson's familiarity with neo-Stoicism is well-documented.¹⁰⁹ In *Sejanus*, however, he dispels the Stoicist notion of inward freedom as a wishful fantasy that does not acknowledge how completely tyrants may hold sway, not only over their subjects' bodies but also over their minds. Arruntius is not unsympathetic to Lepidus' neo-Stoicism. However, he is fully aware that Tiberius and Sejanus do not respect any distinction between public and private dissent in their endeavour to root out the Germanicans. Lepidus' neo-Stoicist arts are, Arruntius argues, useless under such a tyrannical regime:

I would begin to study 'em, if I thought
They would secure me. May I pray to Jove
In secret, and be safe? Ay, or aloud?
With open wishes? So I do not mention
Tiberius, or Sejanus? Yes, I must,
If I speak out. 'Tis hard, that. May I think,
And not be racked? What danger is't to dream?
Talk in one's sleep? Or cough? Who knows the law?¹¹⁰ (4.299–306)

As Arruntius observes, Tiberius and Sejanus have left no space for refuge: 'No place, no day, no hour, we see, is free – / not our religious and most sacred times – / From some one kind of cruelty' (4.312–14).¹¹¹ Especially Arruntius' fears that the tyrant's henchmen will pry into his secret prayers would have resonated with English Catholics, considering that even the clandestine celebration of the Mass had become a crime under Elizabeth and that Catholic prayer books and rosaries had been outlawed. Arruntius describes a political regime in which any space for private dissent has been similarly erased and Stoicist constancy is put under an increasing strain. The Germanicans are forced to resort to constant role-playing, which is a treacherous business and exacts a high psychological price, as Seneca makes clear in *De tranquillitate animi*:

for it is torturous to be constantly watching oneself and be fearful of being caught out of our usual rôle. And we are never free from concern if we think that every time anyone looks at us he is always taking our measure; for many

¹⁰⁹ Several Lipsius volumes are attested in the remains of Jonson's library (nrs. 99–101 in McPherson), including the eight-volume set of Lipsius' *Opera omnia* (1614), the annotations of which are reproduced in Evans, *Jonson, Lipsius, and the Politics of Renaissance Stoicism* 153–338. It is likely, however, that already in the 1590s Jonson was familiar with the original writings by Lipsius, who had corresponded with Jonson's schoolmaster and later friend William Camden since 1586. See Cain, 'Jonson's Humanist Tragedies' 164. For Jonson's interest in neo-Stoicism and Justus Lipsius in particular, see further Evans, 'Sejanus'; McCrea 138–70.

¹¹⁰ CEWBJ 2:336. ¹¹¹ *Ibid.* 2:337.

things happen that strip off our pretence against our will, and, though all this attention to self is successful, yet the life of those who live under a mask cannot be happy and without anxiety. (17.1)

The need for incessant self-monitoring and universal distrust have demoralised the Germanicans to such an extent that they have even begun to internalise Tiberius' apparatus of surveillance: 'May I think, / and not be racked? What danger is't to dream?' (4.304–5).¹¹² Lipsius' consolation for times of persecution, namely, that 'reins are placed on your tongue, then, not on your mind',¹¹³ does not apply to *Sejanus*. There is no *ataraxia* for Arruntius, who is no longer able to cultivate a secret refuge from persecution even in his own mind.

While *politique* approaches to religious toleration usually recommended reticence in penalising private dissent, Sejanus and his henchmen entertain no such scruples. As Tacitus notes, for instance, with regard to Germanicus' son Nero, 'whether the boy spoke or held his peace, there was guilt in silence, guilt in speech'.¹¹⁴ In *Sejanus*, Jonson likewise portrays a regime that does not care whether 'secret thoughtes' do, as Bacon puts it, 'overflowe into overte and expresse actes and affirmacions'.¹¹⁵ Satrius, one of Sejanus' men, notes that Arruntius is 'not yet / Looked after; there are others more desired, / That are more silent' (2.407–9).¹¹⁶ Arruntius, on the other hand, 'only talks' (2.299).¹¹⁷ After the trials of Silius and Cordus, when Tiberius plans to eliminate the Germanicans one by one, he also takes aim at Gallus, noting that 'howe'er he flatter us, / His Heart we know' (3.493–4).¹¹⁸ In *Sejanus*, there is no safety in either silence or conformity.

Even if one manages to keep silent, Tiberius does not hesitate to construe the inwardness which he cannot access otherwise by means of deliberate over- and misinterpretation. Arruntius' dismissal of Lepidus' practice of Stoicist constancy thus harks back to Silius' earlier complaint that '[o]ur looks are called to question, and our words, / How innocent soever, are made crimes' (1.67–8).¹¹⁹ Like Arruntius, Silius is outraged that even his dreams are now subject to scrutiny: 'We shall not shortly dare to tell our dreams, / Or think, but 'twill be treason' (1.69–70).¹²⁰ This focus on the treasonous mind rather than the treasonous deed resonates, in an early modern context, with the potential for political repression inherent in the Edwardian treason statute from 1352, which remained 'at the heart of the Elizabethan treason

¹¹² Ibid. 2:336. ¹¹³ Lipsius, *Concerning Constancy [De constantia]* 2.25. ¹¹⁴ Tacitus 4.60.

¹¹⁵ OFB 1:379–80. ¹¹⁶ CEWBJ 2:285. ¹¹⁷ Ibid. 2:280.

¹¹⁸ Ibid. 2:312. For the conflict between Tiberius and Gallus, who had committed the unpardonable faux pas of taking the former's protestations of humility at face value, see Tacitus 1.12.

¹¹⁹ CEWBJ 2:240. ¹²⁰ Ibid.

code'.¹²¹ This statute defined treason as a distinctly inward crime, namely, '[w]hen a Man doth compass or imagine the Death of our Lord the King'.¹²² As Jonson's play suggests, the (re)construction of the alleged traitor's inwardness is always subject to potential manipulation and therefore opens the door wide for the political abuse of treason charges.

Tiberius and Sejanus target not only supposedly treasonous words and thoughts but also treasonous deeds that have not (yet) taken place. When Sejanus persuades Tiberius that the Germanicans are planning a coup although there is no evidence for their treasonous intentions, he urges a pre-emptive strike against the Germanicans, noting that 'thunder speaks not till it hit' (2.205).¹²³ Even though '[t]he act's not known' (2.194), Sejanus insists that '[i]t is not safe the children draw long breath, / That are provoked by a parent's death' (2.198–9),¹²⁴ that is, as long as Germanicus' children are still able to avenge their father, who died under dubious circumstances (1.159–74).¹²⁵ With Sejanus' cynical plea for pre-emptive measures of repression, Jonson's play once more taps into late Elizabethan Catholic polemics. Cardinal Allen, for instance, claimed that corrupt politicians in the orbit of the Queen had construed – just as Sejanus does in Jonson's play – a 'fiction of conspiracie against the realme, or the person of the Princes' for the sole purpose of justifying the persecution of English Catholics, who allegedly wished for a regime change in England.¹²⁶

Lacking actual evidence for treason, Sejanus' spies are eager to provoke the Germanicans to compromising words and actions. Already early in the play, Sabinus recounts several attempts to undermine Germanicus by means of 'put[ting] him out / in open act of treason' (1.171–2),¹²⁷ a strategy that Sejanus adopts as well. The world of *Sejanus* is a veritable minefield, riddled with agents provocateurs authorised by Sejanus (2.347–64),¹²⁸ including Postumus (2.339–41),¹²⁹ Afer (2.417–26),¹³⁰ Latiaris (4.93–232),¹³¹ and Satrius and Natta (2.405–17, 2.462–9).¹³² This ubiquity of agents provocateurs may well have recalled their role in the Elizabethan government's attempts to identify Catholic traitors, especially in the detection of the Babington Plot. Agents provocateurs played a key role in retrospective Catholic views of the plot, which had been engineered, as Catholic polemicists claimed, as a pretext for moving against the potential pretender Mary Stuart. According to Southwell's

¹²¹ Bellamy 62. ¹²² SR 1:319–20. ¹²³ CEWBJ 2:276. ¹²⁴ *Ibid.*

¹²⁵ *Ibid.* 2:244. According to Tacitus, Tiberius feared Germanicus as a rival (*Annals* 1.7). After his untimely death, there were rumours that he had been poisoned (2.73), allegedly because of his ambition to restore the Republic (2.82).

¹²⁶ Allen, *Modest defence* A2r. ¹²⁷ CEWBJ 2:244. ¹²⁸ *Ibid.* 2:283. ¹²⁹ *Ibid.* 2:282.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.* 2:286. ¹³¹ *Ibid.* 2:327–33. ¹³² *Ibid.* 2:285–6, 288.

Humble supplication (1600), the plot ‘was rather a snare to intrap them [i.e., the Catholic plotters], then any deuse of their owne, sith it was both plotted, furthered, and finished, by *S. Frauncis Walsingham*, & his other complices, who laied & hatched al the particulers thereof, as they thought it would best fall out to the discredit of Catholiks’.¹³³ As Southwell further notes, the notorious Robert Poley (who would later witness the death of Christopher Marlowe) ‘was the chiefe instrument to contriue and prosecute the matter’.¹³⁴ Poley also makes an appearance in Jonson’s epigram 101, ‘Inviting a Friend to Supper’, which bears a striking resemblance to Jonson’s treatment of agents provocateurs in *Sejanus*:

... we will have no Poley or Parrot by,
 Nor shall our cups make any guilty men:
 But, at our parting, we will be as when
 We innocently met. No simple word
 That shall be uttered at our mirthful board
 Shall make us sad next morning, or affright
 The liberty that we’ll enjoy tonight.¹³⁵ (101.36–42)

Sejanus too portrays a world in which even the sacred bonds of hospitality are undermined by spies, who turn innocent conversation into treason. To be sure, Jonson is following his sources closely, but he has a chosen a scenario that bears considerable similarities, for instance, to Allen’s complaint that Elizabeth was ‘putting into [Catholics] houses and chambers, traitors, spials, delators, and promoters, that take watche for her of all their waies, wordes, & writings’.¹³⁶ Agrippina’s dinner guests are similarly beleaguered by spies whose attempts to compromise the Germanicans evoke the machinations of the likes of Poley:

CORDUS. Did you observe
 How they inveighed ’gainst Caesar?
 ARRUNTIUS. Ay, baits, baits
 For us to bite at ...¹³⁷ (2.413–15)

In similar terms, Southwell writes in his account of the Babington Plot how Poley, the supreme fisher of men, was ‘feeding the poore gentlemen with his masters baits’ and ‘suffered them like silly fishes to play themselves vppon the hooke, till they were throughly fastned, that then he might strike at his own pleasure, and be sure to draw them to a certaine

¹³³ Southwell, *Humble supplication* 31–2. ¹³⁴ *Ibid.* 32. ¹³⁵ CEWBJ 5:168.

¹³⁶ Allen, *Admonition* 15. ¹³⁷ CEWBJ 2:286.

destruction'.¹³⁸ For Allen and Southwell, Jonson's vision of free speech at the dinner table in epigram 101 was a utopian scenario, just as it is for the Germanicans in *Sejanus*. In Sejanus' eyes, even the company one keeps is sufficient proof of treason: 'Well, 'tis guilt enough, / Their often meeting' (2.341–2).¹³⁹ Also for Jonson, who had attended a supper party with key figures of the Gunpowder Plot, the notion that 'our cups make any guilty men' would have been a matter of life and death by the time that *Sejanus* went into print.¹⁴⁰ Unlike *Sir Thomas More*, *Sejanus* does not simply portray a crisis of loyalty that hinges on the difficulty of separating religious dissent from treason but further shows how the spectre of treason can be cynically exploited as a pretext for persecution. Driven by paranoia and the ruthless pursuit of power, Tiberius and Sejanus ride roughshod over the political principles of neo-Stoicism. As Jonson's play suggests, it does not matter what palisades one erects between one's private thoughts and one's public words and actions if a malevolent regime is willing to go to any lengths to ferret out one's most secret thoughts and even fabricate them, if necessary.

The Spectacle of Tyranny

Jonson's ambivalence towards the stage is well-known. In his classic survey of Western anti-theatricality, Jonas Barish dedicates a whole chapter to Jonson, arguing that 'Jonson is not interested in vindicating his plays as theater, but in validating them as literature, as dramatic poems'.¹⁴¹ Undoubtedly, this assessment also holds true for *Sejanus*, especially the 1605 quarto, which is a self-contained literary artefact that ostentatiously declares its independence from a performance context. Cygnus, presumably a pseudonym for Hugh Holland,¹⁴² calls *Sejanus* a 'tragedy'¹⁴³ in his dedicatory poem ('To the Deserving Author') and praises Jonson as the model to be imitated by 'tragic writers' and 'tragedians'.¹⁴⁴ However, such designations do not single out Jonson as a man of the theatre. In what is the first instance of the word 'playwright' cited by the OED, Cygnus stresses the difference between Jonson and 'the crew / Of common playwrights'.¹⁴⁵ Rather than appealing to ordinary playgoers, Jonson presents *Sejanus* in the 1605 quarto in terms of contemporary historiographical trends. In his

¹³⁸ Southwell, *Humble supplication* 32. ¹³⁹ CEWBJ 2:282.

¹⁴⁰ *Epigrams* 101.37, CEWBJ 5:168. ¹⁴¹ Barish 139. ¹⁴² Cain, CEWBJ 2:225.

¹⁴³ CEWBJ 2:225, ll. 5, 9, 14. ¹⁴⁴ CEWBJ 2:225, ll. 11, 12.

¹⁴⁵ CEWBJ 2:225, ll. 6–7. For Jonson's own expression of contempt for 'playwrights', see also epigram 49, 'To Playwright' (CEWBJ 5:136).

preface, Jonson names ‘truth of argument’ as one of the four ‘offices of a tragic writer’ (‘To the Readers’),¹⁴⁶ by which he also means historical truth.¹⁴⁷ Tom Cain accordingly observes that in *Sejanus* ‘Jonson is writing as a historian’ and not just as a dramatist.¹⁴⁸ Jonson’s painstaking documentation of his sources with copious annotations suggests as much.

As historical writing, *Sejanus* is undoubtedly indebted to the late sixteenth-century vogue of Tacitism.¹⁴⁹ Lipsius, who made his name as an editor and commentator of Tacitus, frequently quotes the Roman historian in his *Politicorum sive civilis doctrinae libri sex* and thus turned him into a significant contributor to a neo-Stoicist ‘ideology of state building’.¹⁵⁰ In England, on the other hand, Tacitism was frequently – although not exclusively – a critical and oppositional attitude, famously associated with the Essex circle in the 1590s.¹⁵¹ Tacitus also appealed to discontented English Catholics, who recognised their own situation in the historian’s dissection of courts intrigues and his accounts of informers and espionage, which played such a prominent role in Elizabethan Catholic polemics.¹⁵²

Jonson makes use of Tacitus’ *Annals*, not only as a source but also as a model for writing history. As a historiographical method, Tacitism was often a form of political critique, dedicated to the discovery of hidden motives and causes, driven by the impulse ‘to look beneath the surface of those incidents, trivial at the first inspection, which so often set in motion the great events of history’.¹⁵³ Malcolm Smuts accordingly notes that by ‘exposing the ruthlessness of politics at the imperial court, normally hidden by dissimulation, lies and flattery’, Tacitus ‘became a surrogate for Machiavelli: a more respectable authority since, unlike the infamous Florentine, he did not advocate the amoral behaviour he described’.¹⁵⁴ Jonson too knew that Tacitus ‘wrote the secrets of the council and senate’.¹⁵⁵ In *Sejanus*, such a historiographical project is attributed to the historian Cordus. Sejanus calls Cordus

¹⁴⁶ CEWBJ 2:213–14, ll. 13–14.

¹⁴⁷ Bryant. For Jonson’s affinities with historical writing and familiarity with leading historians of the day, see also Worden.

¹⁴⁸ Cain, ‘Jonson’s Humanist Tragedies’ 178.

¹⁴⁹ For a good overview of the early modern reception of Tacitus as a stylist, historian, moralist, and political thinker, see Burke.

¹⁵⁰ Salmon, ‘Seneca and Tacitus’ 187.

¹⁵¹ See Smuts, ‘Court-Centred Politics’; Womersley, ‘Sir John Hayward’s Tacitism’; Salmon, ‘Stoicism and Roman Examples’; Salmon, ‘Seneca and Tacitus’. However, for the increasing awareness in recent scholarship of a more court-centred interest in Tacitus, as exemplified by Elizabeth’s own translation of the *Annals*, see also Philo.

¹⁵² Smuts, ‘Varieties of Tacitism’ 451–3. ¹⁵³ Tacitus 4.32.

¹⁵⁴ Smuts, ‘Court-Centred Politics’ 25. ¹⁵⁵ *Informations*, CEWBJ 5:367, l. 104.

... a most tart
 And bitter spirit, I hear, who, under colour
 Of praising those [i.e., Julius Caesar's republican opponents], doth tax the present state,
 Censures the men, the actions, leaves no trick,
 No practice unexamined, parallels
 The times, the governments . . .¹⁵⁶ (2.306–11)

Besides examining the *arcana imperii*, Cordus' paralleling of past and present is another typically Tacitist trait of the 'politic history' that blossomed in late Elizabethan England.¹⁵⁷ In its commitment to penetrating the surfaces of political appearances, such a Tacitist analysis of history lends itself easily to anti-theatrical attitudes. Jonson's ambivalence towards the theatre thus manifests itself in his Tacitist poetics of disenchantment. In *Sejanus*, theatricality functions primarily as a metaphor for the ruthless dissimulation of a histrionic tyrant such as Tiberius.

As Rebecca W. Bushnell points out, the association of tyranny with hypocrisy and the theatre can be traced back as far as to Plato's *Republic*: 'The rejection of drama is inseparable from Plato's argument against tyranny, for the tyrant is described as a kind of actor, and the threat that tyranny poses is also the threat that drama poses'.¹⁵⁸ It is in *The Prince*, however, that Machiavelli asserted the histrionics of government in an unprecedented manner. A ruler does not necessarily have to practise the virtues commonly recommended in advice to princes, 'but he must certainly seem to'.¹⁵⁹ Hence, one of the key virtues of Machiavelli's prince is dissimulation: 'one must be a great feigner and dissembler. And men are so naive, and so much dominated by immediate needs, that a skilful deceiver always finds plenty of people who will let themselves be deceived'.¹⁶⁰ The most avid dissembler in *Sejanus* is undoubtedly Tiberius, who is singled out for 'the space, the space / Between the breast and lips – Tiberius' heart / Lies a thought farther than another man's' (3.96–8).¹⁶¹ For Arruntius, Tiberius' dissimulation is inherently theatrical. When the trial of Silius begins, Arruntius describes its beginnings in theatrical terms: 'Now, Silius, guard thee. / The curtain's drawing. Afer advanceth' (3.153–4).¹⁶² In the Globe performance, a curtain was presumably drawn back at this point in order to reveal Afer.¹⁶³ By explicitly drawing attention to the mechanics of theatrical representation,

¹⁵⁶ CEWBJ 2:281. ¹⁵⁷ See Levy, 'Hayward, Daniel'. ¹⁵⁸ Bushnell 18.

¹⁵⁹ Machiavelli, *Prince* 62; ch. 18. ¹⁶⁰ Ibid. ¹⁶¹ CEWBJ 2:295. ¹⁶² Ibid. 2:297.

¹⁶³ For the sort of discovery space that may have been used in this scene, see Ichikawa 26.

Arruntius makes clear that this is indeed what the audience will see in the impendent show trial of Silius – a mere piece of political theatre. The Tacitist historian aims to pierce this smokescreen of princely virtue, and this is exactly what Jonson delivers, when the audience witnesses secret soliloquies and backroom dealings, in which *realpolitik* is stripped of all pretence of virtue and justice. Notably, Jonson again marks such moments with meta-theatrical gestures. For instance, when Sejanus lectures the Emperor on the principles of Machiavellian *realpolitik*, he first responds with the usual pious platitudes, but eventually shows his true face: ‘We can no longer / Keep on our mask to thee, our dear Sejanus’ (2.278–9).¹⁶⁴ Throughout the play, Tiberius enacts a persona that has evidently little to do with his actual thoughts and desires.

In addition, Jonson portrays autocratic rule as theatrical insofar as the Senators are no longer participants in the political process of decision-making but mere spectators of Tiberius’ intransparent political manoeuvres. They have nothing left to do but to flatter the Emperor and his favourites and are, as Arruntius suggests, reduced to the equivalent of a theatre audience: ‘We, / That are the good-dull-noble lookers-on, / Are only called to keep the marble warm’ (3.15–17).¹⁶⁵ Sejanus too describes the Senate as ‘an idle looker-on’ (5.257) that is nothing but a ‘witness of my power’ (5.258).¹⁶⁶ The theatricality of power in *Sejanus* thus expresses both the essential hypocrisy of tyranny as well as the passivity to which the Senate is reduced under tyranny.

Finally, Tiberius’ rule is theatrical in a third way, namely, in the manner in which it affects its audience. Theatre (and literature more generally) as well as tyranny rely on the power of illusion, and both appeal, in Plato’s view, to the lower part of the soul. If Plato identifies a ruler’s failure to master their own passions as the source of tyranny,¹⁶⁷ mimetic poets are to be condemned, not least because they appeal to the passions. Thus, ‘the poet who imitates implants a bad constitution in the soul of each individual’ and ‘destroys the rational part, just as when in the state someone betrays it by putting scoundrels in power and destroys the more civilized element’.¹⁶⁸ Drama wreaks havoc in the soul of the spectator just as the tyrant wreaks havoc in the commonwealth. In *Sejanus*, Jonson builds on such Platonic concerns when he suggests that the corrupting force of the theatre facilitates the exercise of tyranny. Jonson frequently characterises

¹⁶⁴ CEWBJ 2:279. ¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.* 2:291. ¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.* 2:361–2. ¹⁶⁷ Bushnell 9–17.

¹⁶⁸ Plato, *Republic* 605B–C.

theatre audiences as irrational, fickle, addicted to newness, and therefore liable to manipulation. In *Discoveries*, for instance, Jonson notes that ‘we see it in fencers, in players, in poets, in preachers, in all where fame promiseth anything; so it be new, though never so naught and depraved, they run to it and are taken’.¹⁶⁹ Audience reaction can even be potentially violent. In his ‘Ode to Himself’, which Jonson prefixed to the quarto edition of *The New Inn* (1629), vulgar audiences ‘[r]un on and rage, sweat, censure, and condemn’.¹⁷⁰ In the folio dedication of *Sejanus* to Esmé Stuart, Jonson even parallels the reception of his play to the political violence which it depicts, when he complains that the play ‘suffered no less violence from our people here than the subject of it did from the rage of the people of Rome’.¹⁷¹

This distrust in theatricality arguably accounts for the frequently voiced critique that *Sejanus* fails to engage its audiences emotionally. Arthur F. Marotti, for instance, considers the play a failed tragedy precisely because of its insistent self-reflexivity, which allegedly impedes ‘those emotional-intellectual effects which culminate in tragic catharsis’.¹⁷² However, Aristotelian catharsis is evidently at odds with the play’s own ethical and poetological outlook. Neo-Stoicists had little interest in pity as an emotional investment in other people’s lives. Lipsius, for instance, distinguishes between reprehensible pity (*miseratio*) and commendable mercy (*miserericordia*). Pity ‘must itself be rejected by a wise and constant man’ because ‘firmness and vigor of mind . . . are not attainable if he becomes dejected and withdrawn not only over his own sorrow, but that of someone else’. On the other hand, mercy, ‘an inclination of the mind toward relieving the poverty or suffering of someone else’, does not require empathy. The truly merciful man does not share the grief of others, but comforts and supports them ‘cautiously and discreetly, lest, as with contagious maladies, he catch the sickness of another’.¹⁷³ Emotional identification is thus to be avoided. Arruntius’ final words in the play, when he reflects on the victims of Fortune, accordingly deter readers and spectators from empathising with the play’s protagonist: ‘[H]e that lends you pity is not wise’ (5.879).¹⁷⁴

Far from effecting catharsis in a recognisably Aristotelian sense, Jonson suggests, the theatre undermines the rule of reason and unleashes passions that a shrewd politician might be able to turn to their own advantage. *Sejanus* accordingly warns Tiberius that the populist Germanicans will

¹⁶⁹ CEWBJ 7:514, ll. 293–5. ¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.* 6:310, l. 9. ¹⁷¹ *Ibid.* 2:212, ll. 3–5. ¹⁷² Marotti 197.

¹⁷³ Lipsius, *Concerning Constancy [De constantia]* 1.12.

¹⁷⁴ CEWBJ 2:390. On the conspicuous absence of anything resembling Aristotelian catharsis in Jonson’s conception of tragedy, see also Chetwynd; Nash 166–8.

manipulate ‘the rout, / That’s still the friend of novelty’ (2.235–6)¹⁷⁵ – an assessment of a populist style of politics that echoes Jonson’s later complaint about the uncritical addiction of theatre audiences to innovation. Ironically, Tiberius applies the lesson learnt from this warning against Sejanus himself once he recognises the latter’s ambition to become Emperor. As Marotti puts it, Tiberius ‘stands behind the play’s final two acts like the playwright hidden behind his creation’ (214) as he manipulates the Senate and the people of Rome in order to turn them against Sejanus. The manner in which Tiberius engineers the downfall of his former favourite seems to follow a tragic script that aims for maximal dramatic effect. First, it seems that the Emperor intends to grant Sejanus the tribunicial power against all expectations. However, Arruntius entertains the possibility that Tiberius’ favour may be deceptive and tries to make sense of it in terms of a tragic peripeteia, carefully crafted by the Emperor in order to leave a lasting impression: ‘You will say / It is to make his [i.e., Sejanus] fall more steep and grievous?’ (5.441–2).¹⁷⁶

Sejanus falls victim to a mob in the streets after Tiberius sends an ambiguous letter from Capri to Rome, which is read out in the Senate. As soon as the wind seems to turn against Sejanus, the Senators, who clustered around the ‘[w]orthy and great Sejanus’ (5.505) only moments earlier,¹⁷⁷ begin to shift their places: ‘Away! / Sit farther. / Let’s remove’ (5.604).¹⁷⁸ In their inconstancy and their lack of independent judgement, which make them such suitable accomplices for Tiberius’ tyranny, the senators behave almost like the theatre audiences that Jonson so often tried to educate with such disappointing results. In ‘The Induction on the Stage’ for *Bartholomew Fair*, for instance, Jonson feels a need to insist ‘that every man here exercise his own judgement, and not censure by contagion or upon trust from another’s voice or face that sits by him’ and ‘that he be fixed and settled in his censure, that what he approves or not approves today he will do the same tomorrow’.¹⁷⁹ If the senators in *Sejanus* do not pass the test of Jonson’s ideal theatre audience and therefore are complicit in Tiberius’ theatre of tyranny, the mob in the street is no better and displays a similarly cynical indifference to actual facts:

What was his crime? Or, who were his accusers?
Under what proof or testimony he fell?
‘There came’, says one, ‘a huge, long, worded letter

¹⁷⁵ CEWBJ 2:277. ¹⁷⁶ Ibid. 2:370. ¹⁷⁷ Ibid. 2:374. ¹⁷⁸ Ibid. 2:378.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid. 4:280, ll. 73–7.

From Capreae against him.' 'Did there so?
Oh!' – they are satisfied; no more.¹⁸⁰

(5.776–80)

Terentius reports deeds 'beyond the acts of furies' (5.740), committed by '[t]he eager multitude, who never yet / Knew why to love or hate, but only pleased / T'express their rage of power' (5.741–3).¹⁸¹ As we further learn, this 'multitude' rushed to the destruction of Sejanus 'with that speed and heat of appetite / With which they greedily devour the way / To some great sports or a new theatre' (5.745–7).¹⁸² Significantly, this comparison between arbitrary political violence and playgoing is Jonson's own and not taken from the play's sources. Jonson's play thus would seem to confirm Plato's view that the theatre, 'in undermining reason, leads exactly to the kind of violence that characterizes the tyrant: it is both the image and cause of tyranny'.¹⁸³

According to Plato, a tyrant can only be judged by someone 'who is able to enter in his thought into the character of a man', who is not 'astonished by the outward show of tyrants', and who sees the tyrant 'stripped of his theatrical trappings'.¹⁸⁴ This assessment tallies with the investigative ethos of Tacitist historiography and Jonson's play, but also stands in tension with the play's critique of a tyrannical regime that does not acknowledge any distinction between private and public and between (supposed) thoughts and actions. As already noted, the play offers very different perspectives on dissimulation and secrecy, depending on whether they are practised by the victims of persecution or by a tyrannical regime. But, instead of resolving this tension between *politique* claims for privacy and a Tacitist impulse to penetrate outward appearances, Jonson accentuates it. Arruntius and Silius, the two Germanicans who are most fanatically committed to the truth, sometimes sound conspicuously similar to the tyrannical regime which they denounce. The Germanicans may criticise Sejanus' and Tiberius' practices of espionage and surveillance, but at times they entertain even more violent desires of accessing their opponents' inwardness.

When Sejanus' two spies, Satrius and Natta, first enter the stage, Silius states that '[their] close breasts, / Were they ripped up to light, it would be found / A poor and idle sin to which their trunks / Had not been made fit organs' (1.24–7).¹⁸⁵ Silius literally wishes to make windows into men's hearts by cracking up the body. When speculating

¹⁸⁰ Ibid. 2:386. ¹⁸¹ Ibid. 2:384. ¹⁸² Ibid. 2:385. ¹⁸³ Bushnell 18.

¹⁸⁴ Plato, *Republic* 577A–B. ¹⁸⁵ CEWBj 2:237.

whether Sejanus might be planning to eliminate the Germanican candidates for the succession of Tiberius, Arruntius gives voice to such a desire in even more violent terms:

If I could guess he had but such a thought,
 My sword should cleave him down from head to heart
 But I would find it out; and with my hand
 I'd hurl his panting brain about the air,
 In mites as small as atomi, to undo
 The knotted bed . . .¹⁸⁶

(1.253–8)

For Arruntius, even the suggestion that Sejanus may have ‘but such a thought’, as opposed to solid evidence or actual deeds, is sufficient to inspire a violent fantasy of dismembering his body in order to discover Sejanus’ inward self. His fantasy does indeed come true at the end of the play when Sejanus’ body is ‘torn and scattered, as he needs no grave’ (5.812).¹⁸⁷ However, nothing is discovered in the process. Whether deserved or not, Sejanus’ dismemberment has nothing to do with truth or justice, but is the result of mob violence and Tiberius’ and Macro’s ruthless political machinations.

As I have argued in this chapter, *Sejanus His Fall* reflects, like *Sir Thomas More*, the predicament of dissenters who find themselves under a tyrannical regime that does not respect the *politique* distinction between inward dissent and seditious agitation. *Parrhesia*, the rhetoric of free speech, and neo-Stoicist moral philosophy serve as the primary resources for the Germanicans in their attempts to navigate a treacherous environment of espionage and persecution. Unlike *Sir Thomas More*, however, *Sejanus His Fall* displays a deep distrust in theatricality. The play’s reflections on theatricality have nothing to do with the tolerance for secrecy or dissimulation which some of the Germanicans claim in the face of persecution. Instead, theatricality is primarily associated with Machiavellian power politics and an immoderate appeal to the passions that stands in contradiction to Stoicist equanimity and detachment. Dissimulation thus remains highly ambivalent. Just as much as it may serve to escape from persecution and to establish a realm of inward sovereignty, it is also one of the most deadly weapons in the arsenal of a tyrant. The Germanicans’ vigorous condemnations of the flattery and dissimulation that reign

¹⁸⁶ Ibid. 2:250. ¹⁸⁷ Ibid. 2:387.

supreme at Tiberius' court therefore stand in unresolved tension with their own eventual refuge to secrecy and indirection. Despite the legitimacy of dissimulation under persecution, it ultimately remains a symptom of crisis and political degeneration that comes with the considerable psychological and social cost of universal paranoia and distrust.