Ben Jonson's *Sejanus* and Shakespeare's *Othello*: Two Plays Performed by the King's Men in *c.*1603

Summary

In 1603, Shakespeare was booed off the stage. He was performing alongside Richard Burbage in one of the period's most notorious flops: Ben Jonson's *Sejanus*. No fewer than four contemporary witnesses, including Jonson himself, attest to the heckles, jeers, and hisses with which the play was greeted by its first audience at the Globe, who apparently had little patience for Jonson's meticulous reconstruction of imperial Rome. By contrast, Shakespeare's *Othello*, written in the same period and performed by the same company, was an immediate success. Their contrasting receptions notwithstanding, there are close points of contact between the two plays, not least of all their shared cast, with Burbage taking leading roles in both. So too they share common themes, imagery, and verbal overlap. Both plays are concerned with the beguiling of a superior by a manipulative servant, both reveal a preoccupation with the compromising or breaching of domestic space. Above all, both plays harness what is a strikingly similar idiom of manipulation. Iago and Sejanus share a way of speaking of and to their intended victim, drawing on a figurative use of charms, opiates, poison, work, and practice. This shared idiom and shared company raise some intriguing questions about the relationship between the two plays as well as possible avenues of influence between Jonson and Shakespeare. There is more in common, this article suggests, between Shakespeare's tragic romance and Jonson's imperial Rome than first meets the eye.

Introduction

At first glance, there is little that connects Jonson's *Sejanus* and Shakespeare's *Othello*. From direct quotations from little-known Greek tragedies to extensive translation of Roman historiography, *Sejanus* is self-consciously erudite.[1] For the main plot, Jonson followed Tacitus's account of Tiberius's influential favourite, Sejanus, and his fall from the emperor's grace as recounted in Books III to VI of the *Annales*. The lost sections of Book V he supplemented with material from Cassius Dio and Suetonius. In addition to these, Jonson turned to Juvenal, Martial, Pliny, Seneca, Persius, and Lucan to flesh out his reimagining of Tiberian Rome.[2] Shakespeare, on the other hand, took as the foundation for *Othello* a novella included by Giraldi Cinthio in his *Hecatommithi* (1565), a collection of romantic vignettes and short stories which also provided him with a plot for *Measure for Measure*.[3] *Othello* wears its classical learning lightly. Iago's apposite appeal to Janus, the two-faced Roman god – one of only two such instances across Shakespeare's work – is made in passing, and when Shakespeare draws on Pliny for Othello's description of the Pontic Sea, he does so quietly.[4] So too the plays differ in their reception. Shakespeare's tragedy gained immediate and lasting popularity and, as Samuel Pepys attests, it was one of the first plays to be performed when the

[1] Tiberius quotes a fragment from a lost tragedy in the second act: Εμου θανοντος γαια μιχθητω πυρι ('Once I have died, let the world be consumed by fire'), *Sejanus*, 2.330. All quotations from the text of the play are taken from the edition prepared by Tom Cain for *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Ben Jonson Online*, ed. David Bevington, Martin Butler, and Ian Donaldson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), accessed via https://universitypublishingonline.org/cambridge/benjonson/k/works/sejanus/facing/#

[2] For a discussion of Jonson's sources, see Ben Jonson, *Sejanus His Fall*, ed. Philip J. Ayres (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990), 10–16.

[3] Geoffrey Bullough, *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare*, vol. 7 (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973), 194; Kenneth Muir, *The Sources of Shakespeare's Plays* (London: Routledge, 2005), 183.

[4] 'By Janus, I think so', 1.2.32. Cf. *The Merchant of Venice*, 1.1.53. For Shakespeare's use of Pliny in *Othello*, see Muir, 188–190. Quotations from Shakespeare are taken from *The Oxford Shakespeare*: *The Complete Works,* 2nd edition, ed. John Jowett, William Montgomery, Gary Taylor, and Stanley Wells (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

theatres reopened in 1660.[5] By contrast, *Sejanus* received a less than enthusiastic response upon its first performance at the Globe. As Everard Buckworth recalls in the commendatory verse prefacing the quarto and folio editions of the play, when he attended a performance 'in the Globes faire Ring', he witnessed 'the Peoples beastly rage, / Bent to confound thy grave, and learned toile'.[6] Almost half a century later, Francis Osborne (1593–1659) would recall how he 'amongst others hissed *Sejanus* off the stage'.[7]

The two tragedies share some intriguing common ground, however, not least of all the fact that they were both staged by the same company. Though often referred to simply as 'Shakespeare's Company', between 1598 and 1611, The Lord Chamberlain's / King's Men were responsible for staging the no fewer than six of Jonson's works, including *Every Man in His Humour*, *Every Man Out of His Humour*, *Sejanus*, *Volpone*, *The Alchemist*, and *Catiline*.[8] As explored below, the company appears to have performed productions of Jonson and Shakespeare back-to-back when touring, encouraging at least some audience members to think of their plays as the work of the company as a whole, as opposed to that of a specific playwright. So too there are some compelling thematic parallels between *Sejanus* and *Othello*. In both cases, a manipulative servant provides the main driving force for their respective plots, and the action performed on stage is prompted by the interventions of Sejanus / Iago. In both plays, the most important plot device is the beguiling of a social superior, that is, of Othello and Tiberius. The plays share the same emphasis on exploiting the fears of the victim, and of cultivating a sustained sense of alarm or anxiety. Both Iago and Sejanus take a keen interest in the emotional

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[5] Samuel Pepys, *The Diary of Samuel Pepys, Vol. 1: 1660*, ed. Robert Latham and William Matthews, 264 (October, 1660), accessed via Oxford Scholarly Editions Online, DOI: 10.1093/actrade/9780004990217.book.1

[6] Ben Jonson, *Seianus His Fall* (London: G. Elld for Thomas Thorpe, 1605) 'To the most understanding poet', sig. A3^{v}.

[7] Francis Osborne, *The True Tragicomedy Formerly Acted at Court: A Play by Francis Osborne*, ed. Lois Potter (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1983), 4.

[8] See, for example, Andrew Gurr, *The Shakespeare Company, 1594–1642* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Steven Urkowitz, 'Did Shakespeare's Company Cut Long Plays Down to Two Hours Playing Time', *Shakespeare Bulletin* 30.3 (2012) 239–262.

impulses and motivations of those around them. While Iago is able to lecture Roderigo in detail on 'the / blood and baseness of our natures' (1.3.318), Sejanus is described as 'well-read / In man and his large nature' (3.694–5). Following an exchange with Tiberius in the second act, Sejanus predicts a trajectory for his victim which we might readily apply to Othello: 'His fear will make him cruel; and once entered, / He doth not easily learn to stop, or spare / Where he may doubt' (2.388–90). Indeed, the fear which Iago inspires in Othello similarly works to 'make him cruel'. It is only in the final moments of the play that Othello comes to be associated with the word, when he weeps 'cruel tears' (5.2.21), and is, in his own description, 'cruel […] yet merciful' (5.2.89), and in Emilia's, 'cruel Moor' (5.2.246). Beyond a common modus operandi, both Iago and Sejanus share a way of speaking of, and to, their intended victims, and, as is explored below, they both appeal to what is a strikingly similar lexicon of manipulation. Sejanus and Iago ultimately derive from the tradition of the stage Machiavel, the skilful deceiver who is able to exploit those around him to serve his own turn, as employed by Marlowe in the *Jew of Malta* and the *Massacre at Paris*, by Shakespeare in *Titus Andronicus*, *Richard III*, and *Hamlet*, and by Jonson in *Volpone* (and perhaps also in Jonson's own version of 'Richard crockback').[9] But even allowing for a shared tradition, there are compelling and specific parallels in the depiction of manipulation in *Othello* and *Sejanus* which warrant further study.

The parallels between the dramatic works of Jonson and Shakespeare have received detailed critical attention.[10] In his lecture series on the two playwrights, Sidney Musgrove

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[9] Philip Henslowe, 'Life Records 26: Dulwich College Archive - Philip Henslowe's Diary', fol. 106^{v}, accessed via *Ben Jonson Online*

[10] See, for example, the essays gathered by Ian Donaldson in *Jonson and Shakespeare* (London: The Macmillan Press, 1983), and those edited by James Loxley and Fionnuala O'Neill Tonning for their special issue of *Shakespeare* 12.4 (2016). For individual studies, see: Nancy S. Leonard, 'Shakespeare and Jonson Again: The Comic Forms', *Renaissance Drama*, 10 (1979) 45–69; Russ McDonald, *Shakespeare & Jonson, Jonson & Shakespeare* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1988); Mark Robson, 'Jonson and Shakespeare', *Ben Jonson in Context*, ed. Julie Sanders (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010) 57–64; Warren Chernaik, 'The dyer's hand: Shakespeare and Jonson', *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare and Contemporary Dramatists*, ed. Tom Hoenselaars (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 54–69; Richard Dutton, 'Jonson and Shakespeare: Oedipal Revenge', *Ben Jonson Journal* 23.1 (2016): 24–51.

identified allusions to *Henry V*, *The Tempest*, and *Hamlet* across Jonson's plays.[11] Brian Tyson has highlighted some persuasive parallels between *Othello* and Jonson's *Volpone* (1606), citing verbal echoes, overlapping themes, and Jonson's burlesque treatment of the handkerchief.[12] More recently, Ian Donaldson has compared representations of jealousy by the two playwrights, observing that 'Jonson's irrationally jealous husband, Thorello, in *Every Man in His Humour*, is intriguingly refashioned in Shakespeare's Othello, whose very name is a near anagram of his'.[13] So too the points of contact between *Sejanus* and *Julius Caesar* have been explored in some considerable detail.[14] It is rare, however, that *Othello* and *Sejanus* are mentioned in the same breath, still less compared to one another.

For R. A. Foakes, *Othello* 'stands in contrast to *Sejanus*', and to date James Shapiro has undertaken the closest comparison of *Othello* and *Sejanus*, suggesting that the latter 'was certainly an influence on *Othello* and has to be taken into account in understanding the dramatic climate in which *Othello* was conceived and executed'.[15] The relationship between the emperor and his most intimate adviser, 'where Sejanus constantly attempts to weave textures of deception around his master, must have provided more than a few clues in developing the relationship of Iago and Othello'.[16] For Shapiro, however, the similarities between the two plays stop short of verbal resonance: 'Jonson's lines must certainly have been running in Shakespeare's head at the time, but in spite of this it is remarkable that we can detect little

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[11] Sidney Musgrove, *Shakespeare and Jonson* (Auckland: University of Auckland Bindery, 1970), 12–20.

[12] Brian F. Tyson, 'Ben Jonson's Black Comedy: A Connection Between Othello and Volpone', *Shakespeare Quarterly* 29.1 (1978): 60–66.

[13] Ian Donaldson, 'Looking Sideways: Jonson, Shakespeare, and the Myths of Envy', *Ben Jonson Journal* 8.1 (2001): 1–22 (12).

[14] Edward Pechter, 'Julius Caesar and Sejanus: Roman politics, inner selves, and the powers of the theatre', *Shakespeare and his Contemporaries: Essays in Comparison*, ed. E. A. J. Honnigmann (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986) 60–78; Ian Donaldson, "Misconstruing Everything': *Julius Caesar* and *Sejanus*,' *Shakespeare Performed: Essays in Honour of R. A. Foakes*, ed. Grace Ioppolo (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2000) 88–107.

[15] 'The descent of Iago: satire, Ben Jonson, and Shakespeare's *Othello*', in *Shakespeare and his Contemporaries: Essays in Comparison* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986), 16–30 (24); James Shapiro, *Rival Playwrights: Marlowe, Jonson, Shakespeare* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 127–8.

[16] Shapiro, 130.

verbal influence of *Sejanus* on *Othello*'.[17] This essay argues that there is, in fact, enough verbal overlap between *Othello* and *Sejanus* to warrant a detailed comparison of the two plays. Such a comparison will help to nuance our understanding of how these two playwrights, and indeed the Lord Chamberlain's / King's Men, were operating in the final years of Elizabeth's reign, and at the beginning of James's. This will in turn show how dramatic material could be repurposed in what are ostensibly very different contexts. By considering the original staging of these two plays by the King's Men and by examining the idiom of manipulation employed by Iago and Sejanus, this article suggests some hitherto unexplored points of contact between Jonson's grim account of imperial Rome and Shakespeare's tragic romance.

Sejanus was first published in quarto in 1605, and was subsequently included in the folio *Workes* of 1616. According to the title page in the folio version, the play was first performed by the King's Men in 1603, that is, at some point between 25 March 1603 and 24 March 1604, according to the old calendar.[18] E. K. Chambers suggests that given 'the theatres were probably closed from Elizabeth's death to March 1604, the production may have been at Court in the autumn or winter of 1603'.[19] Tom Cain has recently cast doubt on a court debut of *Sejanus*, citing a lack of evidence for such a performance as well as the Master of Revel's preference for plays which had already been tried and tested on the public stage. Cain suggests persuasively a narrow window in the first half of 1603, namely 9th–16th May, during which the play's earliest attested audience members – Everard Buckworth, William Fennor, and Esmé Stuart – could all reasonably have attended its first performance at the Globe.[20]

[17] Shapiro, 128.
[18] Jonson (1616), 355.
[19] E. K. Chambers, *The Elizabethan Stage*, 4 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1923), III.367
[20] Tom Cain, 'Introduction', in Ben Jonson, *Sejanus*, ed. Tom Cain, accessed via Ben Jonson Online.

The dating of *Othello* proves more challenging still. The play appears in the Stationers' Register in an entry for 6th October, 1621, as 'The Tragedie of Othello, the moore of Venice'.[21] A quarto edition appeared in 1622, and in the following year it was included in the First Folio. The earliest reference to a performance of the play is preserved in the Revels Accounts for 1604–5, where an entry for the 1st November 1604 records the performance of 'A play in the Banketinge: house att whitehall Called The Moor of Venis'.[22] There is no critical consensus, however, as to the precise date of its composition. E. A. J. Honigmann in the third Arden edition of *Othello* posits a date 'at some point in the period from mid-1601 to mid-1602', while Norman Sanders, editing the play for the New Cambridge Shakespeare Series, suggested that it 'was probably written *circa* 1602–4'.[23] More recently, the editors of The Oxford Shakespeare have highlighted Shakespeare's use of Richard Knolles's *History of the Turks* as a source for *Othello*, which was 'published no earlier than 30 September 1603, so Shakespeare probably completed his play some time between that date and the summer of 1604'.[24] With the evidence as it stands, it may not be possible to settle on a firm date for *Othello*, or indeed for *Sejanus*. If we assume that *Othello* predates *Sejanus*, we might imagine that Jonson was inspired by Shakespeare's staging of the manipulator-manipulated relationship in his dramatic adaptation of Tacitus. If, on the other hand, *Sejanus* predates *Othello*, one might reasonably suggest that

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[21] Edward Arber (ed.), *A Transcript of the Registers of the Company of the Stationers of London: 1554–1640, vol. IV* (London: Privately Printed, 1877), 21.

[22] The National Archives, 'Accounts etc. Parts 13 to 33', AO 3/908/13, accessed via *Shakespeare Documented*, doi.org/10.37078/385. For a history of the debate concerning the authenticity of the Revels' Accounts, see Edmund K. Chambers, *William Shakespeare: A Study of Facts and Problems,* vol. 2 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1930), 331–332.

[23] William Shakespeare, *Othello*, ed. E. A. J. Honigmann (Surrey: Thomas Nelson, 1977) 345; Shakespeare, *Othello*, ed. Norman Sanders (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 1.

[24] William Shakespeare, *The Oxford Shakespeare: The Complete Works*, 2nd edition, ed. John Jowett, William Montgomery, Gary Taylor, and Stanley Wells (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) 873. For a discussion of Shakespeare's use of Knolles's *History*, see Bullough (1973), 212–3. Brandon Centerwall identifies a nod to *Othello* in the verse prologue to a work entitled *Saint Marie Magdalens Conversion,* dating to January 1603. It is possible, however, that the last four lines of the first stanza are in fact all referring to one and the same play concerning 'louers giddy fancies'. This is certainly how 'and' functions in the stanza that follows. Brandon S. Centerwall, 'An Allusion to Othello, 31 January 1603', *Notes and Queries*, 62 (2015) 113–16. Cf. I. C., *Saint Marie Magdalens Conversion* ([England]: 1603) sig. A3r.

Shakespeare, while he himself was performing in Jonson's play, was taken by the dramatically-satisfying prospect of a servant who deceives his master, and by an idiom of manipulation which draws on the figurative use of opiates, poisons, charms, work, and practice. The aim of this article, however, is not to demonstrate definitively a flow of influence in one direction or the other. Instead, it seeks to identify and embrace the various ways in which the two tragedies are interconnected, drawing attention to the porous nature of plays which were developed in the same social and professional contexts. The comparison of the two tragedies and the environments from which they emerged will thus provide a better understanding not only of the interests and practice of the playwrights at the turn of the century, but of the company as a whole.

'Fallen into the Finest Company':
Ben Jonson and The Lord Chamberlain's / King's Men

Sejanus is one of the few plays in which Shakespeare himself is known to have performed. According to the cast list preserved in Jonson's *Works* (1616), when the tragedy 'was first acted, in the yeere 1603 By the Kings Maiesties Servants', the 'principall Tragœdians' included first and foremost 'Ric. Burbadge' and 'Will. Shake-speare'.[25] Given their prominence in the list of players, Burbage most probably took the part of Sejanus, and Shakespeare the part of Tiberius, or vice versa. Burbage himself offers another link between the two plays, performing in *Othello* as 'the greued Moore'.[26] As indicated by the cast lists included in the Folio edition

[25] Ben Jonson, *The Workes of Benjamin Jonson* (London: Will Stansby, 1616), 438.
[26] Quoted by Gabriel Egan in *The Oxford Companion to Shakespeare*, ed. Michael Dobson and Stanley Wells (Oxford: OUP, 2001), 58.

of Jonsons's *Works*, Burbage in fact acted in no fewer than six of Jonson's plays, each of which was staged by the Lord Chamberlain's / King's Men:

(i) *Every Man in his Humour*, first performed in 1598 at the Curtain Theatre in Shoreditch, in which Burgage was acting opposite Shakespeare[27]

(ii) *Every Man out of his Humour*, first performed in the winter of 1599 at the newly-founded Globe Theatre, Bankside

(iii) *Sejanus*, performed at the Globe in 1603, in which Burbage again took a leading role opposite Shakespeare

(iv) *Volpone*, performed at the Globe in Spring 1606, in which he most probably took the title role (he is listed first among 'the Principall Comœdians').

(v) *The Alchemist*, first performed in 1610, perhaps staged, as Lucy Munro suggests, at the company's newly-acquired playhouse at Blackfriars, with a production in Oxford in the same year[28]

These playwrights and actors were then messily interconnected: Shakespeare, performing in *In His Humour*, was acting at the same theatre, The Curtain, where Jonson had first tried his hand at writing and performing, albeit with little success.[29] Though we are now wont to refer to

[27] David Bevington, '*Every Man in His Humour*: Stage History', accessed via *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Ben Jonson* Online. Cf. The National Archives, 'Accounts etc. Parts 13 to 33', AO 3/908/13.
[28] Lucy Munro, 'The Alchemist: Stage History', accessed via *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Ben Jonson* Online.
[29] According to John Aubrey's 'Brief Life', having completed military service in the Netherlands, Jonson 'came over into England, and acted and wrote at The Green Curtaine, but both ill'. John Aubrey, 'LR95d (Early Lives)

'Shakespeare's Globe', Jonson's *Every Man Out* was in fact one of the first plays to be acted at the new theatre in the winter of 1599, which had opened its doors only a few months before.[30] Jonson would return to the Globe with *Sejanus* and *Volpone*, in which Burbage also took leading roles. If Burbage was important to realizing the plays of Shakespeare, he was no less important for those of Jonson, for whom the name 'Burbage' became synonymous with 'best actor' (*Bartholomew Fair*, 5.3.64–7). As noted above, the first recorded performance of *Othello* is from a court context, but it is not unreasonable to assume that it débuted, as with *Sejanus*, at the Globe, where it would be staged again in 1610.[31]

Another potential bridge between *Othello* and *Sejanus* is Alexander Cooke, a company shareholder in the King's Men who took female roles in his early days as a boy actor.[32] As David Kathman has persuasively argued, Cooke can be identified as the 'Saunder' mentioned in the handwritten cast list for *The Seven Deadly Sins*, where he was playing the Queen opposite Burbage's King.[33] He seems to have played opposite Burbage once again in *Sejanus*, where he appears at the end of the cast list, suggesting that he played a female role, either Agrippina or Livia alongside Burbage's Sejanus / Augustus.[34] If we accept that they were acting opposite one another in *Deadly Sins* and, later, in *Sejanus*, it does not seem unreasonable to suggest that the company reprised their coupling for *Othello*, with Cooke taking the role of Desdemona alongside Burbage's Othello. As actors in the Lord Chamberlain's / King's Men, Shakespeare

– Aubrey's Life of Jonson', ed. Kate Bennett, accessed via *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Ben Jonson* Online.

30 Randall Martin, 'Every Man out of his Humour: Stage History', accessed via *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Ben Jonson* *Online*.

31 For Hans Jacob Wurmsser von Vendenheym's note on the 1610 performance of *Othello*, see British Library MS Add. 20001, fol. 9^{v}, accessed via: Shakespeare Documented.

32 For the evidence for Cooke as shareholder, see 'Will of Alexander Cooke', The National Archives, PROB 11/123/410, in which he leaves to his unborn child 'Fiftie poundes alsoe w*hi*ch is in the hands of my fellowes as my share of the stocke'. Fol. 385^{r}

33 David Kathman, 'Reconsidering The Seven Deadly Sins', *Early Theatre*, 7.1 (2004) 13–44 (34–35)

34 Jonson (1616), 438.

and Burbage – and perhaps also Cooke – thus appeared as leading roles in *Sejanus* and *Othello* alike.

At the turn of the century, the King's Men were associated with the plays of both Jonson and Shakespeare. In the last of the *Parnassus Plays*, performed between 1598 and 1602 by the students of St Johns College, Cambridge, two actors from the King's Men, Richard Burbage and Will Kempe, appear as characters. They are holding auditions for the sometime students, Philomusus and Studioso, who, having failed to secure work following graduation, turn to 'the basest trade'.[35] Burbage is quietly optimistic. Even if the dramatic technique of these student actors requires some correction, 'a little teaching will mend these faults, and it may bee besides they will be able to pen a part'.[36] Of note here is how quickly Burbage slips from acting to playwrighting: clearly it seemed reasonable that an aspiring actor might also assist in developing new works for the company, as was the case with Shakespeare. Kempe, however, remains unconvinced:

> Few of the university pen plaies well, they smell too much of that writer *Ouid*, and that writer *Metamorphosis*, and talke too much of Prosperpina & Iuppiter. Why heres our fellow Shakespeare puts them all downe, I and Ben Ionson too. O that Ben Ionson is a pestilent fellow, he brought up Horace giving the Poets a pill, but our fellow Shakespeare hath given him a purge that made him beray his credit[37]

For the author of the Parnassus plays at least, Shakespeare and Jonson were connected by competition, and there is a curious chiasmus here as Kempe slips from Shakespeare to Jonson, and from Jonson to Shakespeare. With the image of 'Horace giving the Poets a pill', he nods

[35] Anonymous, *The Returne from Pernassus* (London: G. Eld for John Wright, 1606) Sig. G4^{r}
[36] Ibid. Sig. G4^{r}
[37] Ibid. Sig. G4^{r}

to the climax of *Poetaster*, which sees the Roman poet Horace administer a purgative to the would-be poet Crispinus to help him vomit up his 'terrible windy words' (*Poetaster*, 5.3.441). The allusion asks the audience to think of Jonson and Shakespeare as sharing a similarly agonistic relationship, with Shakespeare implicitly re-cast as the true poet, Horace, and Jonson as Crispinus. If, as Dan Blank argues, the university audience could reasonably be expected to recognise Kempe and Burbage as having starred in the plays of Shakespeare, then so too this same audience may also have recognised them from the plays of Jonson, who is, after all, cited here in the same breath.[38] As detailed above, Burbage performed in no fewer than six of Jonson's plays, including *Sejanus*, while Kempe is recorded in the cast list for *Every Man in His Humour* alongside Shakespeare and Burbage.[39]

On at least one occasion, the King's Men staged consecutive performances of plays by Jonson and Shakespeare. In a letter of September 1610, the scholar Henry Jackson (1586–1662) attended a series of plays at Oxford performed by the company:

> The King's actors have been here for the last few days. They performed to much applause and a full theatre. But to pious and learned men they seemed, with good reason, to be impious, because, not content with belittling the Alchemists, they most obscenely violated holy scripture[40]

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[38] Dan Blank, "Our Fellow Shakespeare': A Contemporary Classic in the Early Modern University', *Review of English Studies*, 71.301 (2020) 652–69 (661–65).

[39] Jonson (1616) 72. Jonson enjoyed a closer relationship to the universities than Shakespeare. According to Thomas Fuller's *Worthies of England* (1662), Jonson had matriculated at St Johns College, Cambridge, 'where he continued but few weeks for want of further maintenance'. In 1607, Jonson dedicated *Volpone*, with Burbage most probably starring in the titular role, to 'The Two Famous Vniversities', drawing special attention to 'Their Love and Acceptance Shew'n to his Poeme in the Presentation'. In the dedicatory epistle addressed to the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge, Jonson again nods to previous performances of the play in the two towns, referring to *Volpone* as 'my latest WORKE: (which you, most learned Arbitresses, have seene, iudg'd, & to my crowne, approu'd'. Thomas Fuller, *The Histories of the Worthies of England* (London: J.G.W.L. and W.G. for Thomas Williams, 1662) p. 243; Ben Jonson, *Volpone Or The Foxe* (London: Printed for Thomas Thorppe, 1607) ¶[r]; Jonson (1607) ¶3[v]

[40] 'Postremis his diebus adfuerunt Regis Actores Scenici. Egerunt cum applausu maximo, pleno theatro. Sed viris piis et doctis impii merito visi sunt, quod non contenti Alcumistas perstringere, ipsas sanctas scripturas

Today, the importance of Jackson's letter lies in its eye-witness testimony of Shakespeare's Othello: he goes on to mention the 'tragedies which they elegantly and fitly performed', including a drama featuring 'that lady Desdemona, killed before us by her husband'.[41] Of interest to the discussion here, however, is the fact that Jackson makes no mention of either playwright: from Jackson's perspective, he went to see a handful of plays by the King's Men, and he consistently speaks of the company as a whole rather than the work of a specific playwright: 'they were here…they performed…they seemed…they violated' ('adfuerunt…egerunt…visi sunt…violarint etc.'). Intriguingly, in the case of *The Alchemist*, Jackson associates the moral responsibility for the play's content not with its author, but rather with the players themselves. It is the actors who have smeared alchemists and scripture alike and whom he subsequently accuses of 'depravity' ('improbitas'). Jackson's identification of these plays by their content, by their actors, and by their characters, but not their authors, has intriguing implications for how early-modern audiences may have identified parallels across different plays, especially when such plays were being performed in succession.

Between 1598 and 1605, Shakespeare and Jonson inhabited the same intellectual, creative, and social space. Examining the relationship between *Othello* and *Every Man In*, Donaldson remarks: 'if Jonson could learn from Shakespeare, Shakespeare could also learn from Jonson. One thinks of the two men working and talking together, watching and pondering each other's inventions, observing and retaining certain phrases, ideas, names, turns of plot'.[42] This image of a shared creative milieu is supported by the documentary evidence. The anonymous 'Notes for my Perambulation in and round the Citye of London', preserved at

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fœdissime violarint'. 'Henry Jackson to D.G.P.', Corpus Christi MS 304, fol. 83^{v}, accessed via Shakespeare Documented.

41 'Tragaedias, quas decoré, et apté agebant…Desdemona illa apud nos a marito occisa'. Ibid. fol. 83^{v}

42 Donaldson (2001) 12

Edinburgh University Library and identified by Martha Carlin in 2014, place Jonson, Shakespeare, Burbage and 'ye rest of their roystering associates' at the Tabard Inn, Southwark.[43] This was the same inn from which Chaucer's pilgrims began their journey in the *Canterbury Tales*, and it is not difficult to imagine its appeal for Jonson and his peers. The literary and creative opportunities afforded by such an environment are suggested by 'Master Francis Beaumont's Letter to Ben Jonson', dated to the summer of 1605, in which Beaumont writes to Jonson from the countryside, where, he explains: 'I lye, and dreame of your full Mermaide wine'.[44] The Mermaid Tavern, located to the East of St Paul's, was, according to Beaumont, a nourishing environment for the literary minded:

> What things haue we seene?
> Done at the Mermaide? heard wordes that have beene
> So nimble, and so full of subtle flame,
> As if that euery man from whom they came
> Had meant to put his whole wit in one ieast[45]

While Shakespeare was not known to have socialised with Jonson and Beaumont at the Mermaid, it is not unreasonable to imagine a similar atmosphere enjoyed by the two playwrights and their 'roystering associates' at the Tabbard Inn, Southwark. Beyond their shared social and professional spaces, we might add that by 1601, a selection of Jonson and Shakespeare's poems had been printed alongside one another as an appendix to Robert

[43] Edinburgh University Library MS La. II 422/211, fol. 8[r]

[44] Francis Beaumont, 'Beaumont's first letter – 1605: Literary Record 15, line 6', accessed via in *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of* Ben Jonson Online.

[45] Ibid. Lines 47–51

Chester's *Loves Martyr* (1601), though whether these appeared with the consent of either dramatist is uncertain.[46]

The ways in which actors might contribute to the development of a given play within such a milieu is suggested by Aubrey's account of Jonson's exchanges with John Lacy (c.1615–1681), the actor, dramatist, and choreographer whose earliest known role was Ananias in *The Alchemist*. Aubrey records that Jonson 'tooke a Catalogue from Mr Lacy (the Player) of the Yorkshire Dialect – 'twas his Hint for Clownery, to his Comœdy called, The Tale of a Tub. This I had from Mr Lacy'.[47] Whether this was exceptional or representative of wider conversations between actors and playwrights, it is, without Lacy's comment, difficult to say. It does reinforce, however, the impression of a collaborative and consultative environment in which these plays were written, in which conversations between actors and dramatists (who were, as in Shakespeare's case, at times one and the same) were understood to contribute to the content of the plays themselves. In this vein, it is worth noting that Shakespeare himself has been posited, not unreasonably, as the 'second pen' to which Jonson refers in the address 'To the Readers' prefacing the quarto edition of *Sejanus*: 'Lastly I would informe you, that this Booke, in all nu*m*bers, is not the same with that which was acted on the publike Stage, wherein a second Pen had good share: in place of which I have rather chosen, to put weaker (and no doubt lesse pleasing) of mine own, then to defraud so happy a *Genius* of his right, by my lothed usurpation'.[48] For Anne Barton, the most obvious candidate was the resident playwright for the company that would be staging the play: 'Shakespeare, who in any case was going to act in *Sejanus*, would seem a logical choice as someone who could alter the text, with Jonson's cooperation, for performance'.[49] This explanation chimes with the picture painted by the

[46] Robert Chester, *Loves Martyr, or Rosalins Complaint* (London: R. Field. For E. Blount, 1601), 172–183.
[47] Aubrey, fol. 54^{r} / p.4
[48] Jonson (1605), ¶2^{v}.
[49] Anne Barton, *Ben Jonson, Dramatist* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984) 94. For the suggestion that this 'second pen' was George Chapman, see Fredrick Gard Fleay, *A Biographical Chronicle of the English*

documentary evidence of a shared and collaborative milieu. In the above, Jonson insists that he has removed these additions, yet it remains the tantalizing possibility that the verbal echoes across these plays, as explored below, may, in fact, represent the remaining traces of this 'second pen'.

For at least one early audience member, there was something directly comparable about *Sejanus* and *Othello*. In the verse which prefaces the 1640 edition of Shakespeare's *Poems*, Leonard Digges (1588–1635) compared Jonson's *Catiline* unfavourably with Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, and *Sejanus* with *Othello*:

> So have I seene, when Cesar would appeare,
> And on the Stage at halfe-sword parley were
> Brutus and Cassius: oh how the Audience,
> Were ravish'd, with what wonder they went thence,
> When some new day they would not brooke a line,
> Of tedious (though well laboured) Catilines;
> Sejanus too was irksome, they priz'de more
> Honest Iago, or the jealous Moore[50]

Digges has grouped together four plays which deal with persuasion and betrayal at both a personal and public level. With the comparison of *Julius Caesar* and *Catiline*, Digges harnesses two plays exploring a similar subject matter, that is, political intrigue and conspiracy at Rome, and comments on the success with which each playwright has executed the staging of this

Drama 1559–1642, 2 vols (London and Edinburgh: Ballantyne Press, 1891) I.372; R. P. Corballis, 'The 'Second Pen' in the Stage Version of 'Sejanus'', *Modern Philology* 76.3 (1979): 273–277.

[50] William Shakespeare, *Poems* (London: Tho. Cotes, 1640) *3^{v}. For a discussion of Digges and the commendatory verse which prefaces the *Poems* and First Folio, see John Freehafer, 'Leonard Digges, Ben Jonson, and the Beginning of Shakespeare Idolatry', *Shakespeare Quarterly* 21.1 (1970): 63–70.

material. The contemporary audience was apparently 'ravish'd' by Shakespeare's treatment of the 'halfe-sword parley' of the conspirators in *Julius Caesar*, while 'tedious' and 'well laboured' *Catiline* left something to be desired. It is not unreasonable to assume that Digges wished to make a similar comment with his contrast of *Sejanus* and *Othello*, namely that both playwrights had employed comparable subject matter, but had executed them with differing degrees of success. It is worth noting in this regard how readily Digges slips from 'irksome' Sejanus to 'Honest Iago', the two 'vipers' of their respective dramas (the term is used by both Shakespeare and Jonson: *Othello*, 5.2.281; *Sejanus*, 5.660). Once again, it is useful to think in terms of overlapping casts: each of the plays mentioned by Digges was performed by the Lord Chamberlain's / King's Men. The fact that the same actors were performing across these plays may well have reinforced the comparison for Digges, laying yet further emphasis on the respective success and failure of the two plays.

Before examining some of the verbal parallels linking the two tragedies, it is worth underlining that *Othello* certainly left an impact on Jonson, as is suggested by his nod to the tragedy in the *Discoveries* (1641). Here he glances back to Iago's assessment of Othello's credulity, applying the same wording to Shakespeare in a passage which, though it speaks fondly of the playwright, takes him to task for some infelicities of phrasing in *Julius Caesar*.

> The Moor is of a free and open nature
> That thinks men honest but seem to be so.
>
> *Othello*, 1.3.370–1

> He was, indeed, honest and of an open and free nature.

Discoveries, 474–5[51]

In his critique of Shakespeare's style, Jonson thus remembered one of Shakespeare's most celebrated plays, which had, even in its immediate reception, dwarfed Jonson's own tragedy of the same year. The section that follows considers the verbal and thematic overlap between the two tragedies, and how these parallels might have been further underlined by the theatrical practice of the company, common to both plays, as well as the physical presence of the same actors on the stage.

Idioms of Manipulation: Medicine, Poison, and Practice

The same 'cunning, and fine words' (1.506) which pervade *Sejanus* are also to be found in *Othello*, where Iago displays a manipulative dexterity comparable to his Roman counterpart. In both plays, 'medicine', 'charms', 'poison', 'work', and 'practice' are invoked in a figurative sense of persuasion or coercion, and the language of manipulation forms another key layer of contact between the two plays. These verbal parallels may well have been reinforced, this section argues, by the physical presence of the same actors across both performances, as well as a shared theatrical practice developed by the King's Men and put to work in both *Sejanus* and *Othello* alike.

Iago and Sejanus are acutely aware of the persuasive force of insinuation, and speak of their actions in very similar terms. Iago's aside in the third act, in which he meditates on his

[51] Ben Jonson, *Discoveries (printed 1641)*, ed. Lorna Hutson, in *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Ben Jonson Online*, accessed via https://universitypublishingonline.org/cambridge/benjonson/k/works/discoveries/facing/#

plans for the handkerchief, serves as a useful illustration of how these shared idioms converge in *Othello*:

> I will in Cassio's lodging lose this napkin,
> And let him find it. Trifles light as air
> Are to the jealous confirmations strong
> As proofs of holy writ. This may do something.
> The Moor already changes with my poison.
> Dangerous conceits are in their natures poisons,
> Which at the first are scarce found to distaste,
> But, with a little act upon the blood,
> Burn like the mines of sulphur.
>
> *[Enter Othello]*
>
> I did say so:
> Look where he comes. Not poppy nor mandragora
> Nor all the drowsy syrups of the world
> Shall ever medicine thee to that sweet sleep
> Which thou owned'st yesterday.
>
> (3.3.315–327)

This is, in fact, the only appearance of 'poppy' across Shakespeare's works. It is also used, however, in a strikingly similar context in *Sejanus*:

> Well, read my charms,
> And may they lay that hold upon thy senses
> As thou hadst snuffed up hemlock, or ta'en down
> The juice of poppy and of mandrakes. Sleep,
> Voluptuous Caesar, and security
> Seize on thy stupid powers, and leave them dead
> To public cares
>
> (3.595–601)

Although it is difficult to establish with certainty whether *Sejanus* predates *Othello*, the fact that Shakespeare's only appeal to 'poppy' was deployed in the same context and in the same sense by a similar character is certainly suggestive. We might note also that these speeches occur in roughly the midway point of either play, and feature similar action on stage: in both instances, the speech offers the villain an opportunity to interact one-on-one with the audience, and both speeches reach a climax with the re-entry of their victim on stage. These opiates are used to a subtly different end in *Othello*, however. Whereas in *Sejanus*, they are invoked to dull Tiberius's senses – 'Sleep, Voluptuous Caesar' – in *Othello*, they are invoked in a promise to rob Othello of 'his peace and quiet' (2.1.284).

Iago's reflection in the above that 'Trifles light as air /Are to the jealous confirmations strong / As proofs of holy writ' (3.3.316–18) echoes Sejanus's remark in the second act that:

'whisp'ring fame / Knowledge and proof doth to the jealous give' (2.195–6). Both men thus share a keen understanding of how best to exploit 'imputation, and strong circumstances' (*Othello*, 3.3.400), namely by planting and fostering jealousy in their respective victims. So too Iago's suggestion that 'Dangerous conceits […] with a little act upon the blood, / Burn like the mines of Sulphur' (3.3.320–23) has its equivalent in Jonson's tragedy, where Sejanus explains: 'The way to put / a prince in blood is to present the shapes / Of dangers greater than they are' (2.383–5). In both cases, the method 'to put a prince in blood' (or in Iago's case, a general) is to play upon imagined fears (Iago's 'dangerous conceits' echo Sejanus's 'shapes of dangers'), as presented by this pair of 'subtle whisperers' (*Sejanus*, 3.15).

Iago's figurative appeal to 'my poison' is found elsewhere in *Othello*. In the opening scene, Iago bids Roderigo 'poison his delight' (1.1.66), and, in the following act, he describes how his suspicion that Othello has made a cuckold of him 'Doth, like a poisonous mineral, gnaw my inwards' (2.1.271). In the final moments of the play, Lodovico describes the product of Iago's machinations as a kind of poison in itself: 'The object poisons sight' (5.2.363). As mentioned above, at the climax of their respective dramas, both Iago and Sejanus are referred to as 'viper' (*Othello*, 5.2.281; *Sejanus*, 5.660). In addition to its figurative use, poison has an altogether more literal application in *Sejanus*. In the second act, Sejanus devises with Livia and her physician to administer a 'potion' (2.9) to Drusus, one which will give the appearance of a natural death: 'so prepare the poison / As you may lay the subtle operation / Upon some natural disease of his' (2.108–110). So too it is with the threat of poison that Sejanus persuades Agrippina to mistrust Tiberius: '[he] put those doubts in her; sent her oft word, / Under the show of friendship, to beware / Of Caesar, for he laid to poison her' (4.187). Even in this example, however, the literal sense of poison is enmeshed with the figurative, tied to Sejanus's 'la[ying] doubts' in Agrippina. In both plays then, poison is invoked in a figurative sense with regard to deception.

Sejanus's 'charms', which he refers to as tools of persuasion ('Well, read my charms…') are also to be found in Shakespeare's tragedy. Here, however, it is Othello who is first accused of harnessing 'foul charms', 'drugs' and 'minerals', when Brabantio dubs him 'a practiser / Of arts inhibited and out of warrant' (1.2.77–8). A little later he will describe his daughter to the Duke as 'corrupted / By spells and medicines' (1.3.60–1). Othello takes the literal sense of these charges of 'drugs [and] charms' and reworks them as a metaphor for their courtship: 'She loved me for the dangers I had passed, / And I loved her that she did pity them. / This only is the witchcraft I have used' (1.3.166–8). In both plays then, drugs, medicine, and charms are employed, much like poison, in relation to deception and persuasion.

Sejanus and Iago also share a manner of speaking to, and of, their victims. Sejanus's blunt exhortation to Tiberius – 'be not secure' (2.206) – is treated more subtly in the hands of Iago: 'Wear your eyes thus: not jealous, nor secure' (3.3.194). While Sejanus's victim 'permits himself / Be carried like a pitcher, by the ears' (1.416–17), Othello 'will as tenderly be led by th'nose / As asses are' (1.3.372–3). In both cases, a servant pays lip-service to the duty he owes his superior, while consistently keeping an eye to his own advantage. Iago counts himself among those:

> Who, trimmed in forms and visages of duty,
> Keep yet their hearts attending on themselves,
> And, throwing but shows of service on their lords,
> Do well thrive by them, and when they have lines their coats,
> Do themselves homage.
>
> (1.47–52)

Sejanus similarly performs 'shows of service' in the pursuit of his own ambition, and Tiberius describes his servant in precisely these terms in the final act: 'under a pretext of service to us he doth but remove his own lets' (*Sejanus*, 5.580–1). Both Iago and Sejanus profess their 'service' to their masters in equally effusive terms. Sejanus declares to Tiberius that 'Myself / Have no ambition farther than to end / My days in service of so dear a master' (3.527–29). At what is the same midway point in *Othello*, Iago kneels before his general: 'Witness that here Iago doth give up / The execution of his wit, hands, heart / To wronged Othello's service' (3.3.457–59). The performance of service thus serves as another verbal, and visual, link between the two plays.

Both tragedies appeal to the sense of 'work' and 'practice', as both noun and verb, in the sense of exerting influence over or beguiling another.[52] There is, for instance, a persuasive resonance between Iago's 'work on; my medicine works' (4.1.41) and Sejanus's 'Work then my art on Caesar's fears' (2.399–400). In an early speech, Iago remarks that 'He holds me well: / The better shall my purpose work on him' (1.3.361–2), while the 'Argument' prefacing *Sejanus* describes how he 'worketh with all his engine to remove Tiberius from the knowledge of public business'. ('The Argument', 17–19). Referring to Lygdus, the eunuch who will administer poison to Drusus, Sejanus promises Livia and her physician 'I'll work him' (2.14), while in the final scene of *Othello*, Lodovico states bluntly to Iago: 'This is thy work' (5.2.363). In both plays, woven work is also associated with entrapment. As Arruntius remarks of Sejanus and his flatterers, 'now they work; / Their faces run like shuttles; they are weaving / Some curious cobweb to catch flies' (3.22–4). In *Othello*, the handkerchief becomes a symbol and visual reminder of Iago's 'work' as it travels from Desdemona to Emelia, and from Iago to Cassio, and finally to Bianca. The embroidery of the handkerchief is first referred to as 'work' in the third act, when Emelia stumbles upon it (3.3.290–1). Cassio refers to its 'work' twice in

[52] See OED, s.v. 'work, v.' VI.38a-b, 39a.

the next scene (3.4.169; ibid. 178), while Bianca refers insistently to its 'work' four times in succession in Act 4 (4.1.141–145). The handkerchief's 'work' is at once a pattern of embroidery and also Iago's 'work' as described by Lodovico in the final moments of the play, as cited above. This woven work is also remembered in the 'net' which Iago promises to make of Desdemona's virtue: 'So will I […] out of her own goodness make the net / That shall enmesh them all' (2.3.322–24), which itself suggests something of Arruntius's 'cobweb to catch flies'.

'Practice' has a similar function in both plays. The 'Argument' prefacing the printed versions of *Sejanus* records how 'Sejanus practiseth with' Livia ('Argument', 8–9), while at the end of the first act Sejanus declares that 'What was my practice late I'll now pursue / As my fell justice' (1.580–1). In the second act, Sejanus describes his duty as 'to sound, t'explore, / To watch, oppose, plot, practise, or prevent', which will be echoed in Tiberius's exhortation to Macro to 'Explore, plot, practise' (3.704). In *Othello*, Iago similarly describes himself as 'practising upon his peace and quiet / Even to madness' (2.1.284–5), while Lodovico will lament in the final scene: "O thou Othello, that was once so good, / Fall'n in the practice of a cursèd slave' (5.2.287–8). There is some dramatic irony in Desdemona's observing of Othello that 'some unhatched practice […] Hath puddled his dear spirit' (3.4.131–3), which chimes with Silius's suspicions in *Sejanus* over 'some subtle practice' (2.472). The charges which Brabantio makes against Othello bring together the idioms of medicine, charms, and practice: 'thou hast practised on her with foul charms, / Abused her delicate youth with drugs or minerals / That weakens motion' (1.2.72–3). Much like 'work', 'practice' thus forms another key part of the lexis of manipulation and persuasion shared by *Othello* and *Sejanus*.

But the two plays most probably shared more than a merely verbal overlap of 'work' and 'practice'. Beyond the audience's visual recognition of the actors themselves, it is not unreasonable to imagine that the shared practice and stage work of the company as a whole

may have reinforced these verbal parallels. Might the staging of the interactions between Sejanus and Augustus, for instance, have provided a visual cue linking to those between Iago and Othello? In the last of the *Parnassus Plays,* as cited above, Kempe draws an implicit contrast between the stilted delivery employed by student actors with that of their professional counterparts, as represented on stage by Burbage and Kempe:

> It is a good sport in a part to see them neuer speake in their walke, but at the end of the stage, iust as though in walking with a fellow we should neuer speake but at a stile, a gate, or a ditch, when a man can go no further[53]

According to Kempe, the university actor has to reach his mark before he feels comfortable delivering his lines, posing awkwardly 'at the end of the stage'. There is an implicit suggestion here that Kempe and Burbage, as professional urban actors, are capable of delivering their lines in a more natural manner, 'speak[ing] in their walke'. This emphasis on physicality as a means of differentiating between different types of actor opens up an intriguing possibility, namely that the stage practice of a given company may have been distinctive and recognisable to the contemporary audience. The practice-based learning from which these actors, including Shakespeare, presumably benefitted as members of the King's Men offers another level of connection between the two plays.

Iago and Sejanus both speak of their designs in terms of birth. Iago resolves himself to his purpose: 'I have't. It is ingendered. Hell and night / Must bring this monstrous birth to light' (1.3.374–5). Iago had already appealed to a figurative parturition in his remark to Rodorigo that 'There are many events in the womb of time, which will be / delivered' (1.3.348–9). Sejanus employs a similar idiom when he promises to father 'a race of wicked acts' (2.151). In

[53] Anonymous (1606) Sig. G4[r]

terms of a more general overlap in the vocabularies of deception and villainy, we might also compare Jonson's 'plant our engines' (3.491) with Shakespeare's 'devise engines' (4.2.207), and Iago's appeal to 'Hell and night' to Lepidus's appeal to the same: 'hell and lasting night' (5.837–8).

More broadly, both plays are keenly interested in the gap between what Iago refers to as 'outward action' and 'the native act and figure of my heart' (1.1.59–60); or, as Arruntius exclaims, 'the space, the space / Between the breast and lips' (3.96–7). In the first act, Iago explains: 'Though I do hate him as I do hell pains – / Yet for necessity of present life / I must show out a flag and sign of love, / Which is indeed but sign' (1.1.150–30). Here 'sign' carries the sense of a military banner, while 'show out' is used in the specialist sense displaying or unfurling a flag as a symbol of one's allegiance, the martial imagery picking up Iago's reference to 'the Cyprus wars' several lines above (1.1.146).[54] This image has a special significance for Iago, who is referred to repeatedly as Othello's 'ensign', that is, Othello's standard-bearer (1.2.48; 1.3.121; 1.3.278; 2.1.67; 2.1.96; 5.1.50). The signs and flags of love, as used of an outward show or pretence, also appear in Jonson, where Arruntius remarks of Laco as he rushes to pay homage to Sejanus: 'Ay, go, make haste […] With the pale troubled ensigns of great friendship / Stamp'd i'your face!' (5.431–36). Iago's emphasis in the above on the 'necessity' of silence chimes closely with Sejanus's reflection that 'Revenge is lost, if I profess my hate' (1.579). Iago returns to the contrast of outward performance and hidden intent when, having urged Cassio to entreat Desdemona, he remarks: 'When devils will the blackest sins put on, / They do suggest at first with heavenly shows, / As I do now' (2.2.313–15).

In *Sejanus*, Jonson presents a city in which feigning and manipulation have become formalised in the operation of state business, and the intrigues of the imperial palace have seeped into the law courts. Thus Arruntius remarks of Afer in the second act:

[54] See OED, s.v. 'sign, *n.*' 3a–3b; 'show, *v.*' II.3f.

Ay, there's the man, Afer the orator!
One that hath phrases, figures, and fine flowers
To strew his rhetoric with, and doth make haste
To get him note, or name, and any offer
Where blood or gain be objects; steeps his words,
When he would kill, in artificial tears –
The crocodile of Tiber!

(2.418–424)

Deceit and the cultivation of fear function in *Sejanus* as tools of the law courts and of the state more generally, where 'subtle practice' (2.472) is part and parcel of Roman political life and orators deploy a 'mercinary tongue and art' (3.177). It is not only the 'corrupted ministers o' the state' who deal in obfuscation and double-speak, but even the emperor himself (3.236). While the orators of *Sejanus* use these skills to entrap political opponents – as Arruntius puts it, 'they are weaving / Some curious cobweb to catch flies' (3.23–4) – Iago harnesses them to settle private vendettas: 'With as little a web as this will I ensnare as great a fly as Cassio' (2.1.163–4). And while Afer in the above uses 'artificial tears' to condemn innocent men in the public courts as 'the crocodile of Tiber', it is behind closed doors that Othello brings the same charge against womankind: 'If that the earth could teem with woman's tears, / Each drop she falls would prove a crocodile' (4.1.227–8).

Once again, however, there is less distance between the two plays than first it seems. Much like Iago, Sejanus also aims to settle a private vendetta. While Iago suspects that he has been cuckolded by Othello ('twixt my sheets / He has done my office', 1.3.358–9), Sejanus

pursues his 'vengeance' against Drusus for a personal slight, namely that 'the prince struck him publicly on the face' ('Argument', 5–7). The impetus behind the action on stage has as much to do with the personal and the private as it does with Sejanus's ambitions for public life. As with Sejanus, Iago's manipulation of those around him has tangible, albeit indirect, consequences for the public sphere, from the interruption of a counsel of war to the driving of Venice's greatest general to distraction.[55]

It is worth noting that the lexicon of manipulation and deception which can be heard across *Othello* and *Sejanus* does not feature in Cinthio's *Hecatommithi*, Shakespeare's primary source for *Othello*. Although Cinthio at one moment refers to the ensign's 'orditi inganni' (literally 'woven tricks' or 'hatched schemes'), there is no suggestion of the figurative use of medicine, poison, opiates, practice, and work shared by *Othello* and *Sejanus*.[56] This shared idiom of manipulation suggests then that Shakespeare had an eye to Jonson's Roman tragedy when he was reworking Cinthio's tale for the stage. So too the loathing which Iago and Sejanus reveal for their superior is not expressed by the villain of Cinthio's novella. Here the ensign's hatred is directed exclusively towards Disdemona, with whom 'he fell most passionately in love'.[57] Disdemona, faithful to her husband, scorns the soldier's advances, and thus 'the love that he bore for this woman changed into bitterest hate'.[58] The dramatically-satisfying plot device of a servant who secretly despises his superior was not to be found Cinthio but rather in Jonson, suggesting another link between *Othello* and *Sejanus*.

One possibility worth entertaining is that *Sejanus* does indeed predate *Othello*, and that Shakespeare, when he came to write *Othello*, was echoing expressions and turns of phrase

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[55] 'Public sphere' in the sense developed by Jürgen Habermas in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, trans. Thomas Berger and Friedrich Lawrence (Cambridge: Polity, 1989), 3–5.
[56] Cinthio, *De Gli Hecatommithi di M. Giovanbattista Gyraldi Cinthio* (Mandovì: Leonardo Torrentino, 1565), 575.
[57] Cinthio, 's'innamorò […] ardentißimamente'. 574.
[58] Cinthio, 'Mà mutò l'amore, ch'egli portaua alla Donna, in acerbißimo odio'. 575.

which he himself had delivered and heard being delivered (and indeed had perhaps helped to develop as 'second pen') when he was acting opposite Burbage in *Sejanus*. If, as Shapiro suggests, '*Sejanus* is a kind of purist's 'answer' to *Julius Caesar* in exhibiting a treatment of Roman history that gives greater priority to both historical accuracy and statement,' in this light we might similarly view *Othello* as the liberal adapter's reply to *Sejanus*, in which Shakespeare demonstrated successfully the dramatic appeal of a play devoted to the machinations of a devious servant and a duped master.[59] The fact that Shakespeare's only use of 'poppy' occurs in a strikingly similar context as used by Jonson gently suggests the possibility that the composition of *Sejanus* predates that of *Othello*. Whether Shakespeare originally had a hand in the play, or whether his involvement was limited to starring alongside Burbage, it is clear that these plays share meaningful points of contact in in their casting and staging, but also in the idiom with which they treat persuasion and manipulation, appealing to a familiar lexis of poison, medicine, work, and practice.

Conclusion

As the examples explored here suggest, *Othello* and *Sejanus* are messily interconnected. *Sejanus* was, after all, a play in which Shakespeare himself performed, probably in the role of Tiberius opposite Burbage's Sejanus. This was not Shakespeare's first role in a play by Jonson: in 1598 he had performed in *Every Man in his Humour*, also acting alongside Burbage. Shakespeare may even have contributed to an early version of *Sejanus* as the 'second pen', offering his services not merely as a lead actor but also in the development of the script. Staged by the same company in the same year, the two tragedies also share compelling parallels in theme, imagery, and phrasing. Iago and Sejanus employ a similar way of speaking of and to

[59] Shapiro, 128.

their intended victim, drawing on a figurative use of charms, opiates, poison, work, and practice. The physical presence of the same actors on the stage, as well as the shared theatrical practice of the company as a whole, may well have underlined these internal similarities for the early-modern audience. Certainly for Leonard Digges there was something comparable about *Othello* and *Sejanus*, not least of all their respective success and failure with the public. There are then rich extra- and intratextual links between the two plays, which speak of the wider social and professional contexts shared by these two playwrights at the turn of the century.

This article will, it is hoped, prompt further discussion of how Shakespeare's experience as an actor in Jonson's plays may have inflected his own, as well as the kind of shared-practice which the company as a whole brought to the plays they performed, regardless of the author. There remains more to be explored in terms of a practice-based learning within early-modern theatre companies, as well as the opportunities this might have afforded to playwright-cum-actors, as they slipped between performance and composition. In a similar vein, the correspondence of Henry Jackson raises some intriguing questions vis-à-vis the relationship between company, playwright, and audience. To what extent did early-modern spectators feel they were viewing a performance by a particular company, as opposed to a particular playwright? Might the name of the company have carried a similar or perhaps an even greater weight than that of the author? And what role did the audience play in the production and layering of meaning as they recognised a given actor and his technique across e.g. *Sejanus* and *Othello*? By examining these two plays not merely in relation to their authors, but the company that first staged them, and by returning to some familiar documentary sources through the lens of the company, this article suggests some new points of contact between Shakespeare and Jonson as well as the importance of recognising the King's Men as a company associated with both playwrights at the turn of the seventeenth century.