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ABSTRACT

This paper explores Spinoza's relationship to poetry by considering two prominent allusions to classical literature in Spinoza's political treatises. Susan James illuminates Spinoza's worries about the dangers of poetic address. At the same time, Spinoza relies on poetic language and citation to press some central claims. References to Seneca and Tacitus, I suggest, aim to transform the popular imagination with respect to the relationship between government, violence, and domination. Poetic language reinforces his challenge to false solutions to the problems of violence, rebellion, and the precarity of political authority, which preoccupied early-modern political thinkers.

KEYWORDS Spinoza; politics; passion; Seneca; Tacitus

During the second Dutch-Anglo war (1665), Spinoza wrote a letter to Henry Oldenburg, Secretary of the Royal Society in London, in which he described his motivation to practise philosophy:

I rejoice that your philosophers are alive and mindful of themselves and their republic. I shall wait for news of what they have done lately, when the warriors are sated with blood, and rest, to restore their strength a bit. If that famous mocker [Democritus] were alive, he would surely die of laughter. But these turmoils move me, neither to laughter nor even to tears, but to philosophizing and observing human nature better. (Ep 30)¹

Spinoza here alludes to a tendency among philosophers and other learned people to ridicule or bemoan violence and strife as an expression of human folly and stupidity. He **contrasts** his own attitude of being committed to understanding in contrast to reacting and judging.

Spinoza opens his *Political Treatise* in a similar vein by noting the impulse to laugh, weep, or censure in response to common, distressing human behaviours. Philosophers who give into this impulse write satires instead of ethics or political theory, portraying human beings as they would like them to be rather than as they really are (TP I.1). He promises instead to produce a useful political theory by adopting a stance that, rather than condemning human frailty and weakness, seeks to understand human affects and bondage in the same 'mathematical spirit' that a meteorologist brings to studying the properties of the atmosphere (TP I.4).

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¹ For Spinoza's works, I cite from Edwin Curley's editions with standard abbreviations. For further details, see [Spinoza \[1985 \(2016\)\]](#).

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In typical early-modern style, Spinoza exaggerates his distance from other philosophers and avoids citing them as authorities. His allusions to Descartes and the Stoics are not rare, but, when these references are explicit, they tend to be critical (e.g., EIII-pref; EVpref). When he invokes a maxim or cites a widely recognized phrase to reinforce one of his arguments, on the other hand, he borrows from literary rather than philosophical texts. In this way, he aligns his claims with human experience through common adages from classical Latin literature.

In addition to such express citations, Omero Proietti [1985] has found hundreds and hundreds of ‘crypto-citations’ of authors such as Ovid, Juvenal, Livy, Lucretius, Sallust, Terence, Tacitus, and Virgil, among others. Likewise, scholars such as Akkerman [2009] and Klever [2005] have drawn attention to Spinoza’s ample deployment of classical dicta, tropes, and examples.² This body of research shows how Spinoza’s education in classical Latin literature and poetry contributes to the medium in which he expresses his philosophy. Comedies, tragedies, stylized histories, epic and baroque poetry—and, of course, scripture—provide a rich fund of images and narratives upon which Spinoza draws to communicate his famously radical ideas.

However, in ‘Spinoza and the poetic imagination,’ Susan James [2023] demonstrates that Spinoza’s attitude towards poetry is not obviously less ambivalent than his attitude towards philosophy (as it is typically practised). James maintains that Spinoza worries about how poetic writing too often moves and amazes people without teaching or empowering them. Just as he indicts philosophers for deriding humans rather than trying to understand them, Spinoza represents poets as inadequately attentive to opportunities for intellectual empowerment. James’s argument has an intuitive appeal. It would not be surprising if fiction, literature, poetry, and scripture were more likely than philosophy to prize emotional response over edification, and thereby to pose greater threats to understanding. Nonetheless, this does not erase the fact that Spinoza cites or alludes often to literature and scripture, which suggests that poetic writings play a positive rather than a destructive role, enabling him to convey his own principles, arguments, and observations.

Given the superabundance of allusions and crypto-citations throughout Spinoza’s corpus, it would be unwise to generalize precipitously about their function in his text. In this paper, I wish to consider the substance of two prominent allusions to classical literature in Spinoza’s political treatises. Readers of the *Theological-Political Treatise* will likely recall Spinoza’s two citations of Seneca’s *Troades*: ‘no one has sustained a violent rule for long; moderate ones last’ (TTP V.22; XVI.9; XX.8). Likewise, readers of the *Political Treatise* may remember the two allusions to Tacitus’ *Agricola*: ‘they make a desert and call it peace’ (TP V.4; VI.4). If we follow the cues of these allusions, we will be led to the phenomena that spurred Spinoza’s study of human nature: bloodlust, violent clashes, and human bondage. The same concerns saturate classical poetry and literary history, and early-modern political writers drew freely upon these to make their arguments. Spinoza employs similar strategies, while simultaneously challenging the conclusions his contemporaries draw with appeal to the same literature.³

² While most scholars examine Spinoza and Latin literature, Ansaldi [2001] and Montag [2020] consider his relationship to the Spanish Baroque.

³ Bastiani [2021], e.g., persuasively shows that Spinoza often cites Tacitus in a way that acutely challenges the Tacitism of his time. In this paper, I draw on her argument and arrive at parallel conclusions with respect to Spinoza’s relationship to Seneca.



Spinoza's literary imagination, I argue, works towards reforming common ways of imagining the relationship between government, violence, and domination. This suggests that Spinoza's citations do not function only to signal membership in a community of letters. Neither are they mere vestiges of his language learning. His references serve as interventions that challenge the false solutions to the problems of violence, rebellion, and the precarity of political authority that preoccupied early-modern political thinkers. His unorthodox invocations of Seneca and Tacitus work against the impulse to imagine that human bondage to the affects responsible for so many inconveniences of political life calls for subjection to absolute authority. Of course, it is not surprising that Spinoza advocates forms of government that will empower rather than suppress the constituents, but he does so by acknowledging and reforming the very images that contribute to a widespread 'fear of the masses' [Balibar, Stolze, and Giancotti 1989].

1. Spinoza and Poetry

Spinoza associates imagination with human bondage and reason with freedom. He claims that only what leads to intellectual perfection is good (EIVapp5). But what **leads to** a stronger and more powerful intellect? James's corpus compels an appreciation of how imagination, for Spinoza, is more than a source of error, limitation, and servility (e.g., James [2010, 2020]). It is also a power without which we would be unable to navigate the world, improve ourselves, and generate cooperative and enabling forms of life.⁴ Nonetheless, James argues that Spinoza remains wary of one of the most celebrated exercises of human imagination: poetry. She notes that, while Spinoza praises going to the theatre as part of a wise life (EIVp45s), 'poetry in the post-prophetic era is often philosophically destructive.' Early moderns understood poetry in an expansive sense to include various 'imitative,' representational arts, written or spoken, that conjure evocative images aiming to move their audiences. Although we cannot avoid communicating imaginatively, a constructive relationship with poetry, according to James's interpretation of Spinoza, demands 'a strong intellect' and 'the power to reign in the imagination and enjoy fiction from a place of safety.' Even the learned and wise should not abandon themselves to fancy, but 'need to be on their guard against imaginative excess' [James 2023: XXX]. Even if it is a mistake, according to James, to attribute to Spinoza a contempt for the imagination, the poetic imagination must be held in check so that it might serve rather than hinder a rational and joyful life.

James draws her conclusions about Spinoza's assessment of poetry primarily from an examination of his claims about biblical prophecy. Here she discerns his cautious and ambivalent views on poetry, which she contrasts to his praise of the gentler forms of persuasion typical of the apostles. Several of Spinoza's closest friends also dedicated themselves to reforming the interpretation of scripture, which was surely one of the biggest influences on the popular imagination. They were also enthusiastic about the didactic potential of the dramatic and visual arts as means of educating, empowering, and uniting the Dutch people [Israel 2020; Leo 2022]. It is not clear to what extent Spinoza might have shared the project of his friends—in the group *Nil volentibus arduum*—to reform the style and performances of the local theatre to

⁴ See also Bertrand [1983] and Gatens and Lloyd [1999].

better inculcate civic virtue. James writes that, according to Spinoza, ‘prophecy is usually most authoritative when prophets and their listeners share a stock of images and associations’ [James 2023: XXX]. One might suppose, therefore, that Spinoza’s friends, interested in the rational reform of theatrical and visual art, hoped that art and culture could bring the philosophical and popular imaginations closer together.

In his political works, Spinoza advocates moral, theological, and political reform to promote collective virtue. I am not aware that Spinoza anywhere addresses the reform of the arts. Neither did he, like his friend Meyer, author ennobling drama or fiction for mass consumption. Nonetheless, we might understand his own practice of writing as an exercise of imaginative reform. His repetition of common sayings from classical literature does not play the same role in his writings as it does in those of many of his contemporaries [Bastiani 2021]. Likewise, he does not always reinforce the representation of humanity promoted by the author of a given citation [Pugliese 2019]. Spinoza often takes a familiar saying, well known to his audience, and places it in the service of his own arguments. Spinoza’s citations connect his unfamiliar picture of human existence and his heterodox arguments to familiar images and dicta. This enchaining of novel arguments to classical tropes, images, and maxims is a means of helping his ideas to take hold. It is a technique for accommodating while transforming the imaginations of his readers.⁵ In what follows, I will trace ~~in his citations~~ a thematic concern with the corrosive effects of violent conflict and enslavement.

2. Tragedy in the *Theological-Political Treatise*

In the *Theological-Political Treatise*, Spinoza ~~twice cites expressly~~ a line from Seneca’s tragedy, *Troades* (*The Trojan Women*), ~~and a third time more~~ indirectly: ‘no one has sustained a violent rule for long; moderate ones last’ (TTP V.22, XVI.29, XX.9). The seventeenth century was the apex of Seneca’s popularity as a philosopher, dramatist, and exemplary persona.⁶ He ‘was a revered political authority from the medieval to the early-modern era, particularly ... among theorists of monarchy’ [Stacey 2015: 289]. With his repeated invocations of Seneca to support the claims of his avowedly democratic TTP, Spinoza represents an exception to the typical alignment between Seneca and monarchism. For Seneca and many of his medieval and early-modern admirers, the best polis will be led by a virtuous monarch, whose arch virtue is *clementia* [Stacey 2007]. Spinoza embraces Senecan virtues of particular interest to monarchists, such as *clementia*, while disassociating them from the art of ruling. For Spinoza, *clementia* follows from the universally desirable virtue of generosity through which we forge friendships (EIIIp59).⁷ Thus, Spinoza reframes the widespread popularity of Seneca’s moral and political thought by associating it with his staunchly democratic treatise and his universal ethics.

Spinoza could assume familiarity with Senecan drama among his readers. ‘The seventeenth century is perhaps the most “Senecan” period in the history of European

⁵ We must admit, also, that Spinoza was likely not acting with such deliberate care every time he inserted a literary allusion. The words and scenes in poetry and literature that Spinoza retains from his own education in Latin indicate something of the imagery that has taken up residence in Spinoza’s imagination.

⁶ Spinoza discusses all three aspects scattered throughout his writing.

⁷ Whereas Spinoza’s near contemporaries, such as Justus Lipsius, emphasize Senecan virtues as qualities a monarch ought to cultivate, Spinoza’s political theory expressly does not depend on the virtue or wisdom of rulers.

theater' [Schubert 2015: 83]. In this era, 'the European political imagination came to be haunted by the depiction of tyranny in Seneca's tragedies' [Stacey 2015: 301]. Spinoza ties his claims about the vulnerabilities of state power to Senecan tragedy, which was widely recognized for its distressing violence and emphatic denunciation of tyranny. Yet, he does so not to defend a virtuous institution of monarchy, but rather to warn of the dangers of arousing popular indignation. But what was so horrific about the regimes that Seneca portrays? What are the violent practices most prone to threatening political stability?

In Chapter V of the TTP, Spinoza observes that human passions are such that 'no society can continue in existence without authority and force' (TTP V.22). Spinoza's contemporaries see human passions as vices, especially prominent along the *vulgus*. The tendency towards violent and disruptive passions among the people, according to the average Senecan, calls for monarchy entrusted to a virtuous ruler. Spinoza agrees that humans are more often governed by passions than reason, but liability even to extreme passions is universal. Indeed, those in power may be especially tempted by the opportunities that insufficiently constrained power offers to vice (TP VI). Since, for Spinoza, susceptibility to those passions about which Seneca himself is especially worried in *De Ira*, such as anger and the desire for revenge [Seneca 2010], ought to constrain rather than justify political authority.

Spinoza thus draws on Seneca to warn against the dangers of abusing political authority. He claims that, as soon as subjects perceive their rulers or the laws to be contrary to their well-being, they will be unable to recognize the advantages of following the law. If an authority forbids, for example, what people cannot prevent themselves from doing, feeling, or thinking, subjects

can only rejoice whenever some evil or harm happens to their ruler, however much evil it may bring them; they can't help wanting all sorts of bad things to happen to him; when they can, they help to bring them about (TTP V.22).

Spinoza thereby deduces from human nature the necessity for coercive power in the hands of the state, while simultaneously insisting that yielding to force and authority must appear both feasible and attractive to the populus. Any rules that appear harmful or demand the impossible of human nature will, of necessity, be contravened. To reinforce his point, he invokes Seneca's tragic poetry, which represents the excessively destructive obliteration of Troy by the Greeks.

In Chapter XVI, Spinoza cites the same dictum while observing the human tendency to be determined by 'the absurdities of appetite.' This chapter defends democracy as the most desirable and 'natural' form of government, and the citation of Seneca is meant to reassure those opposed to popular government that large, sovereign councils will mitigate rather than inflame absurdity. When he alludes to Seneca again in the *Theological-Political Treatise*, he maps this same line directly onto his declaration that the suppression of speech is the greatest possible expression of violent rule: 'a government which denies everyone the freedom to say and teach what he thinks will be most violent. But when a government grants everyone this freedom, its rule will be moderate' (TTP XX.9). In what must have been a surprising juxtaposition, Spinoza aligns efforts to control human speech with the spectacular violence of Senecan tragedy [Sharp 2021].

Seneca's play concerns the immediate aftermath of the conquest of Troy by the Greeks, which consists in negotiations over the fate of the vanquished. While the

Trojan men have died in battle or fled, the women and children have been distributed among the Greek victors. The titular Trojan women will become wives, concubines, or slaves. When the women speak, they refer to those fates indifferently as ‘slavery.’ Their futures will be defined for them without consideration of their interests by the very men who killed their fathers, husbands, and sons. Their family bonds are both physically destroyed and socially erased. They will die or submit to force, which will assign them a new household to serve, perhaps a new name, and likely new children to bear and raise.

The destruction of kinship as well as the enslavement and concubinage of women and children among the vanquished was an expected outcome of war. It is an acute form of violence, and an historical practice to which, as we will see, Spinoza will allude again. Orlando Patterson [1982: 5–6] names this phenomenon through which people are severed from their kin, claims of birth, and community traditions, ‘natal alienation’. It is a constitutive feature of the social death that contours the existence of enslaved people. A slave loses any civil rights they may have had. A conquered citizen who is enslaved dies in law in exchange for preserving her physical life. The tragic drama portrays the reality that, while men lose their physical lives in battle, women and children more often *lost* their social lives to war slavery [Glazebrook 2016].

The line Spinoza cites repeatedly is spoken by Agamemnon.⁸ His men have decisively conquered Troy, and yet there are further demands for Trojan blood. Achilles, from the grave, demands the sacrifice of a young Trojan woman who was promised to him when he was alive. Calchas, a Greek prophet, advises the death of the young heir to the Trojan throne so that he does not grow up and seek revenge. The play features the grief of the surviving Trojan women, and their pleas for mercy as they are about to be absorbed forcibly into Greek society. Agamemnon agrees with the Trojan women and warns his countrymen against abusing their advantage through further, unnecessary killing: ‘*violenta imperia continuit diu, moderata durant*’ [Seneca 2002: 143].⁹ He tries, thus, to persuade his fellows that drenching an already blood-soaked sword is madness. They are not persuaded. Instead of moderation, the tragedy unfolds with the crushing triumph of violent, uncontrolled power.


But if a commonwealth is to establish a form of rule that lasts, Spinoza warns with Agamemnon that it must avoid excessive, uncontrolled oppression. New rule must appear—or be able to come to appear—as advantageous to any of the vanquished who may become citizens. Even for those who will remain enslaved indefinitely, brute force relations are not sustainable in perpetuity. Violence defines conquest, but if that conquest is devoid of measure, the destructive origins will not be forgotten. Pursuing further sacrifices after the Trojans have submitted seeks to obliterate their hope for the future and threaten the durability of the *polis*. In *The Trojan Women*, this perspective is voiced by Andromache who, in an effort to draw attention away from the child she is hiding from the conquerors, proudly declares that she is willing to suffer any form of torture the Greeks wish to visit upon her: ‘Bring on thy flames, wounds, devilish arts of cruel pain, and starvation and raging thirst, plagues of all sorts from every source, and the sword thrust within these vitals, the dungeon’s

⁸ This paragraph is borrowed from my essay ‘I dare not mutter a word’ [Sharp 2021], which analyses the play in relationship to another form of political violence. The following two paragraphs are modified from the same essay.

⁹ The Loeb edition translates this as ‘ungoverned power no one can long retain; controlled, it lasts.’

pestilential gloom.’ Because the anguish of seeing her child killed would be greater than her own physical torment, she declares that her ‘dauntless mother-love knows no fears’ [Seneca 2002: 173]. She will endure torture and death to save her child. Once her child is under mortal threat, nothing could make her obey.

275 Andromache’s child, Astyonax, is not only the being she has nursed and raised. He is also someone in whom the Trojan people had invested their hopes. The entire play is a protracted negotiation over whether the young woman and child must die. They are symbolic sacrifices. Further violence establishes not the defeat of the Trojans, for that is already secure. ~~It serves to convey~~ to the Trojan women and their children that they should expect perpetual subordination to the whims of their new rulers. Thus, the Trojan survivors are enslaved in the political sense. They are subject to an arbitrary power with no concern for their own well-being. Force decides their fate in its own interest. This occurs alongside their subjection, in several cases, to legal slavery. Many or most will lose their status as citizens and be subject to the jurisdiction of a foreign master. They have lost family members as well as their ability to determine future kinship relations. They will be pulled up by the roots and replanted to persist (or not) in hostile soil.

280  Such is the violence that portends the end of a governing power. It is impetuous, insecure violence that aims to subjugate by destroying any hope or confidence subjects may have previously enjoyed. But terrified, wounded, and resentful subjects, Spinoza warns, become indignant and dangerous to the governing powers. Spinoza’s mantra conveys that violent rule, which imposes domination and tears at the threads of social life, is precarious rather than absolute. It does not last. It is not in the interest of rulers to produce hopelessness, slavery, and social death.

285 Despite this Senecan lesson, Spinoza also seems to admit in his *Political Treatise* that despotic rule *can* endure. ‘No state has stood so long without notable change,’ he claims, ‘as that of the Turks’ (TP VI.4). In reflecting on the real possibility of what Sandra Field calls ‘nonideal endurance’ [2020: 216–34], Spinoza turns away from Seneca, the moral thinker, towards Tacitus, the political realist. He acknowledges that people can be ruled through relentless oppression, but such rule is that of a master over his slaves; it is not political rule. The following section will consider the invocation of Tacitus to reflect further on despotism, slavery, and social disintegration.

305 **3. Slavery in the *Political Treatise***

In the TTP, as we saw, Spinoza cites Seneca to suggest that modes of rule that are hostile to human nature will be self-undermining and precarious. In the *Political Treatise*, he observes that people can be violated, enslaved, and torn from their families, as Seneca describes in his tragedies, yet the unfortunate subjects, ‘terrified by fear, don’t take up arms.’ Spirits can be so crushed that they ‘know only how to be slaves’ (TP V.4). Without Seneca’s reassurance that abusive government is necessarily fragile, Spinoza offers a famous line from Tacitus [2010: 30]: ‘they make a desert and call it peace’. In this section, we will see that Spinoza draws on Tacitus, parallel to his use of Seneca, to reject absolute rule and to connect it to slavery. While he allows that it is not impossible to dominate a people and habituate them to abject servitude, he implies that those who see control and uncontested authority as the *telos* of statesmanship are, in fact, outside the bounds of politics. They write satire rather than political theory. They hold up violence and political slavery as the solution to popular strife,

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which expresses censorship rather than understanding of ‘human life.’ They call the degradation of a people to a state of hopeless persistence ‘peace,’ but, he implies rather scathingly, collective social death is not the answer to the messiness of human affairs.

In her article, ‘Spinoza against political Tacitism,’ Bastiani [2021] argues that Spinoza draws inspiration from the Roman histories of Tacitus but disdains the anti-populist and staunchly monarchist Tacitism of his contemporaries. Whereas thinkers such as Lipsius and Clapmarius appeal to Tacitus to insist that ‘common people are dangerous’ and ought to be ruled through trickery and deception, Spinoza draws the opposite conclusions. He refers to the familiar words of Tacitus describing the terrifying masses, but attributes problems of unrest to vicious social organization (TP V.3; VII.27). Bastiani [2021] contends that Spinoza’s use of Tacitus is a strategic effort to challenge his ideological opponents on their own ground. He takes their weapons—the words of Tacitus—and interprets them to antagonize the anti-plebeian monarchists. In particular, I will suggest, he accuses them of advocating slavery and calling it virtue.

Spinoza twice invokes Tacitus’s poetic remark, which is itself a stylized allusion to Livy [1926], to suggest that ruling people such that they never contest political authority can only be called ‘slavery.’¹⁰ It is clear from this citation that he is addressing those who believe that civil unrest justifies absolute monarchy.

Admittedly, experience seems to teach that it contributes to peace and harmony when all power is conferred on one man. No state has stood so long without notable change as that of the Turks. On the other hand, none have been less lasting than popular, or Democratic states. Nowhere else have there been so many rebellions.

Still, if slavery, barbarism, and desolation [*solitudo*] are to be called peace, nothing is more wretched for men than peace.

In what follows, he contrasts the silence imposed by slavery to a rowdy yet healthy democracy.

No doubt there are more, and more bitter, quarrels between parents and children than between masters and slaves. Nevertheless, it doesn’t make for the orderly management of a household to change paternal Right into mastery, and treat children like slaves. To transfer all power to one man makes for bondage, not peace. As we’ve said, peace does not consist in the privation of war, but in a union or harmony of minds. (TP VI.4; trans. alt.)

Thus, Spinoza poetically conveys that a commonwealth in which no one quarrels, challenges, or speaks openly against political authority is a condition of solitude, isolation, and slavery. Because there is no contest, there is no possibility for a mental community. Indeed, there is no political rule. Although Spinoza suggests in the TTP that such a disintegration of human existence cannot be achieved, insofar as a ruler accomplishes it, he would become a master rather than a monarch.

Earlier in the TP, Spinoza more explicitly cites Tacitus to suggest that being driven primarily by fear of death describes slavery rather than citizenship.

A commonwealth whose subjects, terrified by fear, don’t take up arms should be said to be without war, but not at peace. Peace isn’t the privation of war, but a virtue which arises

¹⁰ ‘As far as the Latins are concerned, you can procure peace for yourselves in perpetuity either by savagery or by forgiveness ... You may destroy the whole of Latium and make of it vast deserts [*solitudo*].’ Titus Livy [1926], *History of Rome* (Bk. 8, 13.14–15). Quoted in Woodman [2009: 1].

from strength of mind ... When the peace of a commonwealth depends on its subjects' lack of spirit—so that they are led like sheep, and know only how to be slaves—it would more properly be called a wasteland [*solitudo*] than a commonwealth. (TP V.4)

A conquered people—like prisoners of war forced into slavery as a substitute for death—may continue to live, but threat of death structures their existence. Whereas Hobbes contends that fear of death animates rational respect for natural law, Spinoza invokes Tacitus to maintain that, if horizons are narrowed to such a degree that subjects 'care only to avoid death,' they are better described as 'slaves' (TP V.6).¹¹ Confined by terror to the tunnel-vision of self-preservation, subjects suffer a barely tolerable and inhuman *solitudo*. The word—translated as 'wasteland' or 'desert'—points to isolation as a profound deprivation. Do the masses suffer 'isolation' in a merely poetic sense?¹²

The line from Tacitus [2010] is excerpted from a speech given by a leader of the Britons, describing the Roman thirst for conquest as a nihilistic indulgence of base lusts:

Neither East nor West has served to glut their maw. Only they, of all on earth, long for the poor as they do the rich. Robbery, butchery, rapine, these liars call 'empire': they create desolation [*solitudo*] and call it peace (30)

Tacitus [2010] attributes this wretched condition of *solitudo* to the conqueror's assault on kinship: 'Our children and kinsmen, by nature's law, we love above all else. These are torn from us by conscription to slave in other lands' (31).

Solitudo is both a poetic rendering of a conquered people's psychic landscape and a description of how (political and legal) slavery separates people from each other and thus from their own power to persevere in being. As we saw in Seneca's drama, in Tacitus's history, children are taken, partners are separated, and bonds are violated. Spinoza's allusion to Tacitus aligns violent rule with the solitude entailed by social disintegration. He thereby encourages his readers to imagine passive submission and absolute obedience as a form of slavery, loneliness, and mental isolation contrary not only to peace but to political life as such. When political thought is driven firstly by fear of the masses and the desire to silence, disable, and suppress the constituents of a commonwealth, it is ultimately an expression of contempt for human existence.

Spinoza deploys the powers of poetry to exclude political slavery from a political philosophy that is guided by an understanding of human reality. When he condemns those who might find a solution to popular unrest in a 'wasteland' or 'desert', he insists that 'the best state is one where men pass their lives harmoniously.' He explains further, 'I mean that they pass a human life, one defined not merely by the circulation of the blood, and other things common to all animals, but mostly by reason, the true virtue and life of the Mind' (TP V.5). Politics, like ethics, is good insofar as it leads to intellectual flourishing rather than mere physical perseverance. Spinoza's artful allusions convey poetically that political thinkers must reject slavery and social death in its multifarious forms to observe ~~more closely~~ human nature without ridicule.

¹¹ Steinberg [2018: 95–9] discusses the relationship in these passages between slavishness and 'unwillingness'.

¹² I discuss this in detail in Sharp [2022], on which I draw for these concluding remarks.



Disclosure statement

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