Review

The Senecan Tragedy and its Adaptation for the Elizabethan Stage: A Study of Thomas Kyd’s The Spanish Tragedy

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Received 29 December, 2014; Accepted 26 August, 2015

There is no doubt that the rise of the Greek drama, as evident in the classical writings of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides, had left a predominant impact on the Elizabethan writings of comedies. However, it was the tragedies that stood supreme. Yet, their appeal to the mass Elizabethan audience for their brutal images displayed on stage would not have been emotionally captivating had it not been for the Roman classic works of Ennus and Seneca which paved the way for an era ever destined for genius minds in the theatrical world. Imitated by the Italian and French literary works, the Senecan tragedies, in particular, had indeed inspired the Elizabethan theatre, for they were widely modeled by some great Elizabethan dramatists. Hence, this paper is an attempt to revisit the historical writings of Seneca and observe his artistic vision of staging tragedies as adapted and projected in Thomas Kyd’s The Spanish Tragedy.

Key words: Senecan tragedies, Stoicism, Gorboduc, Senecan dramatic machinery, the Spanish tragedy.

INTRODUCTION

Born in 4 B.C. in the Southern city of Cordova in Spain, Lucius Annaeus Seneca was a son of an intellectual family; his father, known as Senecan the Elder, was a history writer. Seneca (the son) had emerged to be a major scholar in the fields of philosophy, politics and drama. There has been much speculation amongst critics as to how many plays Seneca wrote, but some assume that “ten tragedies [were] linked to his name; Hercules Furens (The Madness of Hercules), Troades (Trojan Women), Phoenissae (Phoenician Women), Medea, Phaedra (also entitled Hippolytus), Oedipus, Agamemnon, Thyestes, Hercules Oetaeus (Hercules on Oeta), and Octavia” (Slavittte, 1995, p. 29). His plays, it is argued, were modeled on the Greek tragedies in his concern with the subject-matter. He was particularly influenced by the philosophical observations of Aristotle and the writings of Euripides. In fact, Seneca’s subjects are “the most sensational he could choose—the horrid banquet of Thyestes, the murder of Agamemnon by his faithless wife, the guilty love of Phaedra, the execution of...
Astyanax and Polyxena, the revenge of Medea...In Octavia, only tragedy whose subject is not taken from Greek mythology, the theme is still of lust and blood (Cunliffe, 1965, p. 17). Although the classical employment of revenge might not be regarded as a genuine creation in Seneca's plays, he, unlike the Greek vision of tragedies, affirmed his strong belief in stoicism, a philosophical term better defined as recognizing "that what is experienced comes from necessity and therefore must be endured. Self-sufficiency resides in extreme self-control, which restrains all feelings, whether pleasurable or painful" (Harman and Holman, 1996, p. 496). Thus, to Seneca, man has no hope in escaping his own fate or even in strive to free himself from the inevitable catastrophes. In other words, man is doomed to suffer the agonies of life and his self-satisfaction lies in attaining a complete control of his passions and in endurance. In Octavia, Seneca stresses his philosophical vision when the heroine, Octavia, is led to her own death in Act V, scene iv (as translated by Kelly Cherry):

Why do I try to delay the inevitable?
Be done with it—and me! —you
To whom fortune has delivered me.
I am not afraid to die.
Put in the oars, unfurl the sails,
And let the pilot make for the shores
Of Pandataria, of death!

In Thyestes, Seneca deals with the instability of power and the human predicament of surrender and helplessness of whoever receives the ruler's wrath. What Seneca offers as an alternative to such state of self-defeat is what he himself withdrew from his own suffering five years after Nero's reign in A. D. 54: to bear one's suffering and misfortune in a self-preserved dignity; in a stoic experience. Thus, all of Seneca's tragedies center on the promise of "how to endure a world in which there is no justice, no safety from tyrants, no guarantees—political or divine—of human dignity" (28).

Therefore, in tracing the Elizabethan adaptation of the Senecan tragedies, it seems logical to examine first the traditional framework of Seneca's works that had later set the standards for many of the tragedies during the Renaissance era. A predominant convention of his tragedies was the systematic construction of the form in which plays were divided into five acts. Looking back at the Roman drama, we realize that "the division into five acts was apparently established by Varro [a Roman scholar and a satirist], and is noted by Horace [a Latin lyric poet] in the Ars Poetica as a rule to strictly observed; but it was the example of Seneca that governed the practice of the modern stage" (Cunliffe, 1965, 32). Related to Seneca's divisions in tragedies was also his belief in the conventional employment of language, the fact that his plays had more less concern for the public stage than for the purpose of recitation. As evident in a number of his tragedies, the rendering of the melancholic monologues with the concise dialogues results in a highly rhetorical and well-polished language. Such combination of styles serves Seneca's adherence of the stoic convention that his characters live through. In Thyestes, for instance, one observes the following passage:

In nos aetas ultima venit,
O nos dura sorte creatos,
Seu perdidimus solem miser,
Sive expulimus!abeant questus.
(The last age has come upon us; in our wretchedness, we have either lost sight of the sun, or driven him away, we who were born happy. Away with doubts and fear!) (Cunningham, 1981, p. 19)

According to Dana Gioia (1995), "Seneca's plays appear bombastic, lurid, schematic, and dramatically alert. They rely too exclusively on the power of speech to portray human action, rather than presenting the action itself...His sensational plots explore emotional extremes at the expense of understanding the pathos of the ordinary" (36). In addition, the conventional use of the chorus, which separate Senecan five-act tragedies, have less, if not absent, participation in the development of the plot. Though the chorus in the Greek tragedies fulfilled various functions from that of Seneca's, the fact that:

[in] Sophocles the Chorus has become subordinate to the dialogue. In Euripides its connection with the action is often slight; in Seneca this connection disappears altogether; the chorus is already in its way to exclusion from the play and final abuse....When this change was once effected, the presence of the Chorus was no longer necessary to the conduct of the action. (Cunliffe, 1965, pp.34-35)

Nonetheless, the Senecan Chorus still exercises a definite role by commenting on the moral dimensions of the acts preceded and, at the same time, predicting what is to come in the plays. But above all, the chorus functions to highlight the Senecan Stoicism which reflects the paradoxical realities of the world that man is confronted with:

...one the one hand, the world is assumed is to be rationally ordered, a enevolent deity immanent, and evil merely apparent; on the other hand, observation of man's experience suggests that the world's design is baffling, that powerful and even hostile forces impinge upon man, that adversity is and escapable part of the human condition. (Kiefer, 1983, 61)

Acts of violence have also defined the Senecan convention of tragedies. Blood shedding, suicide, and adultery
are common patterns in his plays. These violent displays, however, take place not on but off stage. They are presented in long speeches reported by messengers. In Thyestes, T. S. Eliot (1956) points out that “the performance of the horrors is managed with conventional tact; the only visible horror is perhaps unavoidable presentation of the evidence—the children’s heads in a dish” (23). The theme of revenge for Seneca demands the emergence of the Ghost which acts as an instrument of motivation for the revenger to take immanent action. In fact, Seneca’s handling of the Ghost as a major stock character is a reformed extension of the supernatural effect that the Greek playwrights had some use of. Yet, it was Seneca who aimed at “develop[ing] the impressive effects of the supernatural appearances and devices, and bequeath them to the modern stage” (Eliot 1956, p. 44). In Thyestes, the Ghost of Tantalus appears in the opening of the play, summoned by one of the Furies, Megaera, to bear witness the fate of his descendants. We also notice the Ghost of Agrippina in Octavia. Other stock characters include the cruel tyrant, the faithful servant, and the female confidant. By combining the necessary elements of the theatrical action, Seneca was able to produce melodramatic and sensational effects that lay out the exploitation of his interest in the ideological conviction of Stoicism through the diverse trajectories of his characters’ psychological suffering. Hence, Barden (1985) argued that, for Seneca, “the basic plot…is that of inner passion which bursts upon and desolates an unexpecting and largely incomprehensible world, an enactment of the mind’s disruptive power over external reality:

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\begin{align*}
\text{Effera ignota horrida} \\
\text{Tremeda caelo pariter ac terris mala} \\
\text{Mens intus agitat.} \quad (\text{Med. 45-47}) \\
\{\text{Evil savage, unknown, horrible, enough to shake the heavens and the earth equally, the mind stirs up within.}\} \quad (\text{Barden, 1985, p. 39})
\end{align*}
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The importance of the Latin Senecan tragedies on the Elizabethan theatre was quite immense and far-reaching. Unlike the Greeks’, Seneca’s plays were widely studied, imitated, and performed in the universities of Oxford and Cambridge, the grammar schools and the Inns of Court. It seems that “it would be difficult to overstate the influence of Seneca on [the] Elizabethan tragedy. English dramatists absorbed him from every side—directly from the Latin, from French and Italian adaptations, and from [Thomas] Newton’s popular Tenne Tragedies” (Slavitt 15). Of these, six English translations appeared during 1559-1566. Seneca’s Troades and Medea were performed twice at Trinity during the years 1550-63. In 1561-62, there appeared the first claimed English play that modeled the Senecan Traditional framework. It was Gorboduc by Norton and Sackville, two members of the Inner Temple. Performed at Westminster, the play had a genuine subject-matter (a story from British history). Yet, it had structure of the Senecan tradition, for the play “…falls into five acts, each preceded by an allegorical dumb-show and followed by a chorus of ‘ancient men of Britain’ to comment on the action…the chorus is strictly Senecan, as are the Nunitus who reports the death of Ferrex…” (Parrott and Ball, 1958, p. 37). Gorboduc is also composed in Senecan blank verse. In 1556, Robert Wilmot and four members of the Inner Temple wrote Gismonde of Salerne—a well-known Italian story—which was performed before Queen Elizabeth. Its Seneca’s five-act structure and chorus were evident, although it ignored his convention of presenting the horror off stage: “the hero here dies in the sight of the audience, and the hero’s heart is brought bleeding upon the stage” (Brooke, 1911, p. 197).

Again, in 1588, Thomas Hughes’ Misfortunes of Arthur appeared and was performed by the Queen at Gray’s Inn. The death of King Arthur was its subject but the play made use of Seneca’s Ghost and Chorus. Locrine (1591?) was another earlier and popular English tragedy. Written by an anonymous scholar, the play’s theme, like its predecessors, was about British mythical history. Again, the play employed the appearance of two ghosts, although Locrine displayed “no trace of the classical restraint: the utmost reaches of torment and atrocity are brought before the eyes of the spectators” (Brooke, 1911, p. 208). Moreover, some Elizabethan playwrights had imitated the Italian and French adaptations of Seneca’s works. George Gascoigne and Francis Kinwelmersh’s Jocasta is the English translation of the Italian version, Giocasta, written by Lodovico Dolce. The play was presented at the Gray’s Inn in 1566. Another major literary translation was Thomas Kyd’s Cornelia from Corinna by Robert Garnier (1534–90), a major French playwright. Samuel Daniel’s Tragedy of Cleopatra also followed the writing style of Garnier’s Antonie. If these examples of major translations say much about the indirect influence of Seneca’s conventions of tragedies on English drama, then his marks on the Elizabethan playwriting, in particular, were more visible and intensified at a time the art of theatre had reached its intellectual peak and profundity.

So, with names like Kyd, Marlowe, Shakespeare and others, a new reformed concept of the English theatre had risen. As intellectually innovative and brilliant in their mastery of composing drama, the Elizabethan playwrights could not resist the magical allure of Seneca’s conventions in the writing of tragedies. To realize the extent of empowerment of the Senecan tradition on the Renaissance drama, it would seem appropriate to refer to David Slavitt’s Seneca: The Tragedies:

Seneca provided the formal pattern for Elizabethan
tragedy. He gave Tudor Playwrights the five-act structure to frame the dramatic action with a beginning, middle, and end... He introduced a cast of helpful secondary characters to keep the narrative moving; the messenger... the female confident... the loyal friend or servant. Seneca also introduced the catalyzing figure of the ghost who returns from death to provoke revenge. The classical stature of Seneca's tragedies also gave the Elizabethans permission to use violent and sensational plots featuring murder, suicide, adultery, incest, trickery, insanity, and revenge... Seneca's other contribution to English tragedy was magnificent language. He showed playwrights the lofty alternatives to the... verse of earlier drama. In style as in subject matter, Seneca is the poet of extremes (Slavitte, 1995, 13-14)

Critics agree that the poetic and bombastic style of Seneca's plays was the most appealing, inspirational, and dominant attribute to be embraced by the Elizabethan playwrights. T. S. Eliot suggests that the adaptation of the Senecan iambic line in the English tragedies is a direct and profound instrument in reforming blank verse. In his Essays on Elizabethan Drama, Eliot points out that "several scholars... have called attention to a trick of Seneca of repeating one word of a phrase, especially in stichomythia, where the sentence of one speaker is caught up and twisted by the next. This was an effective stage trick, but it was something more; it is the crossing of one rhythm pattern with another" (33). In illustrating Seneca's use of stichomythia, Eliot refers to Marlow who "could hardly have failed to learn something from this. At any rate, the study of Seneca had its part in the formation of verse..." (34). Yet, Eliot is haste to admit that, although Seneca's stylistic devices were attractive in the eyes of the Elizabethan playwrights, certain aspects in their theatre were rather novel and owe nothing to the Senecan tradition:

When we examine the plays of Seneca, the actual horrors are not so heinous or so many as are supposed... In The Spanish Tragedy, Hieronymo bites off his tongue. There is nothing like this in Seneca...The tragedy of Blood is very little Senecan, in short, though it made such use of Senecan machinery; it is very largely Italian; and it added an ingenuity of plot which is native. (22-27).

Other critics agree that the sole theatrical inheritance in the Elizabethan tragedy which involved a departure from the Senecan conventions was the application of horror scenes on stage. They claim that the conventional function of a messenger reporting the bloody events was no longer needed; the Elizabethan playwriting was rather seeking to expose the demanding images of terror and violence to an audience that lived in an age marked by public beheadings, hangings, or any other cruel punishments. So, blood was shed on stage instead of reported, thus, employing a direct and effective dramatic instrument in achieving the utmost sensational effect in English theatre. Peter Ure's (1974) "On Some Differences between Senecan and Elizabethan Tragedy" affirms the failure of the Senecan tragedies to attain the cultural unity as opposed to the Elizabethan:

It is that unity which seems to make most plain the difference between the art expected by a coterie, however elegant and self-depreciatory...and the kind expected by a society which sees itself as central without being exclusive, and coherent without fanatical. It is, in short, the difference between Senecan tragedy and Elizabethan drama... (66).

In addition, Ure urges that, unlike the Elizabethan treatment of classical mythology, the Senecan tragedies lack the "correspondence with an objective world." In other words, Ure argues that...the gods, the hells, the mythological heroes of Seneca are merely verbal material, rhetorical cannon-fodder; they perish for want of being symbols, of partaking of the true nature of myth...And just because of their failure to be related to the symbols of a religious system, all Seneca's characters partake to a greater or lesser extent of...ridiculousness. (66-67).

Critics, like Ure, maintain that the notion of revenge in the Elizabethan plays is never to be confined to the Senecan conventions; it is an necessary extension of the various political, economic, and social changes that marked the Elizabethan age and that which furnished a thrive in theatrical techniques and devices to be experimented. Nevertheless, critics still admit the profound presence of the Senecan machineries in the most celebrated, sensational and highly aesthetic tragedies of the Elizabethan era. One of which is The Spanish Tragedy.

Produced probably during 1586-1588, Thomas Kyd's The Spanish Tragedy was performed repeatedly by Lord Strange's company the Rose on Bankside in 1592. The Senecan influence is evident in some of the dramatic devices that Kyd utilized in his play:

...the revengeful Ghost who opens the play, the Chorus... All these, of course, delighted the scholars and his audience, as did the Latin quotations and paraphrases of the classical scattered liberally through the play. The extreme sensationalism, the grim pursuit of revenge, the madness of the hero, the madness and mutilation were all justified by the example of Seneca...From Seneca, too, Kyd gets his sense of style [the rhetorical eloquence and sententiousness of his soliloquies and dialogue]. Kyd like Seneca, attempts to excite interest in the tragic
conflicts within his characters; Hieronimo’s grief, his passion for revenge, his intermittent madness… (Parrott and Ball, 1958, p. 76).

Moreover, The Spanish Tragedy embraces the motif of madness as a key element in producing its melodramatic effect that Hieronimo and other characters’ experience. Kyd, for instance, depicts Isabella’s psychological anguish, a ruined state of emotional collapse that causes her suicide in Act IV, scene ii:

Ah, nay, thou Hieronimo dost delay their deaths’ Forgives the murderers of thy noble son, And none but I bestire me –to no end. And as I curse this tree from further fruit, So shall my womb be cursed for his sake, And with this weapon will I wound the breast, The hapless breast, that gave Horatio suck.

Asserting other critics’ belief in the debt of the Elizabethan tragedies to the Senecan classics, Brooke (1911) praises “the exploitation of insanity [which] became, indeed, one of the marked features of Kydian tragedy, even outvaluing as a theatrical asset the inherited Senecan ghost” (211).

Another new experimentation of the classical conventions of theatre is Kyd’s interest in dramatizing the blood shedding scenes on stage rather than sheer reporting of events which only occurred towards the beginning of the play (the narrative account of an earlier battle unfolded by the Ghost of Andrea’s appearance). This also applies to Kyd’s employment of ‘the-play-within-the-play’, a remarkable theatrical device that owes nothing to the Senecan tragedy, for it is probably derived from “H. Wotton’s Courteous Controversie of Cupids Cautels (1578), or from Wotton through the anonymous Soliman and Perseda…” (Edwards, 1959, p. 48). Later inspired by Shakespeare’s Hamlet, Kyd’s play scene functions as a manipulative approach by the revenger, Hieronimo, in pursuing his revenge scheme for the murder of his own son. Such theatrical innovation in The Spanish Tragedy illuminates a more dimensional movement in its plot which, in turn, brings a degree of dramatic suspense. The play also remarks the Elizabethan spirit in portraying the hierarchal decent of the revenger himself. He must hold a higher social status; a knight marshal like Hieronimo or a prince like Hamlet. In other words, the revenge seeker is seen as a chosen representative of a divine law. His own revenge is consciously committed to the morality of gods in restoring the order of things. His mission is then a divine one. We notice this in Hieronimo’s soliloquy in Act III, scene iii:

Ay, heaven will be revenged of every ill, Nor will they suffer murder unrepaid: Then stay Hieronimo, attend their will, For mortal men may not appoint their time.

Critics agree that the influence of the Latin tragedy as shown by the classical works of Seneca had a profound and undeniable force in the English drama. His tragedies appealed most to the Elizabethan taste and served the playwrights’ purpose in expanding the theatrical effects of tragedy and its dimensional elements to an audience that demanded a mastering manipulation of plot, action, and character development. Thus, one can only say that the conventional formula of Seneca –the employment of “his sensationalism, his didacticism, and his stress upon the tragedy of the individual” (Parrott and Ball, 1958, p. 35), not to mention his genuine introduction of the dramatic machinery (the five-act division, the use of Chorus, of the ghost, of horror, and the rhetorical style and blank verse) is thoroughly studied and modeled during the Elizabethan age of drama. Thomas Kyd’s The Spanish Tragedy still stands as a testimony of the Senecan extraordinary impact on the Elizabethan theater.

Conflict of Interests

The author has not declared any conflict of interests.

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