

TRANSACTIONS
OF THE
AMERICAN PHILOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION
1948

I.—The Stoic Base of Senecan Drama

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The final paragraph briefly summarizes the main points of this article.

Criticism of Senecan drama is now at the crucial stage of passing from vituperation to something more nearly approaching understanding. The idea is being strongly developed that the nature of this drama may be illuminated by establishing the organic relationship between the plays of Seneca and his philosophical writings. A generation ago it was possible to say that Seneca "deviates farthest from Stoicism in his portrayal of the emotions in his plays."¹ More recently, Mendell presented the view that "it is largely the tone of Stoic doctrine that gives to the plays a certain unity of atmosphere."² And now most recently of all, Miss Marti has suggested that the sequence of the plays preserved in MS E was arranged by Seneca to illustrate a series of Stoic ideas closely related to the thought of the essays.³

It is difficult to accept Miss Marti's interpretation in detail. Beyond the mechanical difficulty involved in attaching such exact significance to manuscript sequence, the acceptability of her view hangs upon the controversial question whether Seneca did write these plays in order to teach neo-Stoicism, and there seems to be some lack of clarity in the sequence of themes which she finds in the plays. On the other hand, the concept which underlies her interpretation is very important and must not be rejected because of the

¹ E. C. Chickering, *An Introduction to Octavia Praetexta* (New York, 1910) 32.

² C. W. Mendell, *Our Seneca* (New Haven, 1941) 153.

³ Berthe Marti, "Seneca's Tragedies. A New Interpretation," *TAPhA* 76 (1945) 216-245.

form in which it is presented. Therefore it is all the more necessary to study the relationship between Senecan drama and Stoicism⁴ in a more fundamental way, to show that Stoic ideas conditioned the nature of these plays right from the primary point where Seneca, consciously or unconsciously, adopted an attitude toward the treatment of tragic subjects. It will also appear that this study contributes to the understanding of Seneca's later influence. More than one scholar has come to the conclusion that "criticism of the Senecan influence has been much impaired by an uncritical tendency of scholarship for some fifty years to view Seneca's plays with feelings ranging from condescension to contempt. Our first requirement is a serious and reasonably sympathetic study of Seneca himself."⁵

The unique characteristics of Seneca's treatment of tragic themes are revealed clearly by comparison of parallel Greek and Roman plays. We may take the *Troades* and the *Medea* as the best examples of the Senecan type, which show two main aspects of the influence of Stoicism. One great difference between the Euripidean tragedies and their Senecan counterparts is to be found in the two different attitudes toward the nature of the catastrophes which they treat. It is generally true of the Greek attitude that the force of evil is recognized as a universal element permeating nature; it is never explained away or attributed solely to weakness or criminality of human character. The Euripidean *Troïades* expresses pained questioning concerning the universal malady which strikes all participants in the war about Troy. Troy and Greece are both prostrated. Menelaus is disillusioned by the emptiness which follows military victory. Talthybius provides perspective by his capacity to understand and pity Trojan pain. In counterpoint to the suffering of the Trojans, the prologue creates anticipation that the Greeks will be punished for the desecration of Trojan shrines. All this is based upon the characteristically Greek view that evil is a real and pervasive aspect of nature which cannot be discounted by explaining it solely in terms of human actions or attitudes.

In the Euripidean *Troïades*, this is clear enough, but it is not commonly recognized that his *Medea* in one aspect is based upon similar thought. After a point, the vengeance of Medea is por-

⁴ This term is used throughout for Seneca's neo-Stoicism.

⁵ H. W. Wells, "Senecan Influence on Elizabethan Tragedy: a re-estimation," *Shakes. Ass. Bull.* 19 (1944) 83.

trayed as an unnatural violence which produces horror and revulsion. But her psychology has a natural basis. It is not merely that Euripides sympathetically shows her great devotion to Jason, not merely that her love has been betrayed. Beyond this, Medea's experience and her reaction to it are represented as more than a case of a woman whose love becomes hate. Her trouble is regarded as an aspect of women's thankless and discredited status in general and of the tragedy which often attends parenthood.⁶ In both these Greek plays, evil is a natural part of the order of things, in the *Troïades* as the source of misery for both the Trojans and the Greeks in war, and in the *Medea* as the source of the unhappiness which causes violent revenge.

In turning to the Senecan counterparts of these plays, we must recognize that the characteristics of Seneca's dramatic style tend to obscure the intellectual premises of his work. Yet there is a definite attitude beneath his plays, and, moreover, the characteristics of his dramatic manner may be better understood through an analysis of this thought. The concept which explains much in Seneca's treatment of tragic themes may be expressed as follows: in his plays, evil is either externalized as the workings of fate or fortune which can be nullified by reason or endurance, or is thought to be caused by the deterioration of character which results when passion destroys reason.

In the *Troades*, both of these aspects can be seen. The extraordinary courage of Astyanax (1090–1103) and Polyxena (1137–1164) makes light of their deaths to such an extent that the two victims triumph; the chorus finds consolation, even satisfaction, in the fact that all share the same fate (1009–1041). The other aspect, the view that passion causes evil, is found in the behavior of the Greeks. They are portrayed as murderous criminals maddened with blood and power. The first idea concerning the Greeks expressed in the play is that the victor is *avidus irae* (22). Agamemnon himself analyzes the causes which turn the soldier into a blood-crazed madman (279–285): in the intoxication of victory and the darkness of night, the Greeks have acted like beasts. Here there is nothing of the Euripidean thought that Trojans and Greeks share a common experience. The misfortunes of the Trojans are regarded as an experience which is caused by the passionate excesses

⁶ Key passages which create this thought are 190–203, 230–251, 410–445, and especially 1081–1115 before the catastrophe.

of the Greeks, and which can be nullified and made external to human feeling by endurance.

In his *Medea*, Seneca presents the theme as a study in criminal psychology. The play is constructed to show how Medea's rage rises in crescendo to a frenzied madness which allies itself with everything evil in nature and destroys all in its path. The orientation of both of these Senecan plays can be reduced to the concept that evil is significant only in relation to strength and weakness of character: when character is impervious to passion, it negates evil; when character is deteriorated by passion, it causes evil.⁷ The radical difference between the concepts involved in Greek and in Senecan drama can be indicated in yet another way. Aristotle regards the emotion of pity as a proper part of the emotional effect produced by tragedy. In the Stoic thought of Seneca, pity is a mental defect arising from weakness and irrational sensitivity to the ills of others.⁸

In these two Senecan plays, then, we find the attitude that catastrophe can be negated by endurance, and is caused by passion; or, differently expressed, that evil is significant only in relation to strength and weakness of character. This is a dramatic expression of the essential purpose of Stoicism, namely, to provide protection against the experience of suffering evil, which is the subject of the Senecan philosophical essays as a whole. At times Seneca criticizes the rigidity of Cynic and Stoic beliefs concerning pain and misfortune. He rejects the Cynic attitude that man must be insensible to feeling.⁹ He even expresses dissatisfaction with "orthodox" Stoic belief that evil is to be ignored, and refers to his own thinking as

⁷ Part of the distinction here made between Greek and Senecan dramatic thought is stated in Kastner and Charlton, *The Poetical Works of Sir Wm. Alexander*, vol. 1 (London, 1921) xxii: "The doers of terrible deeds, no longer comprehended as elements of an all-embracing divine dispensation, become just the villains of the piece." Substantially the same characteristic of Seneca is regarded as the product of conditions in the Roman theater by M. Hadas, "The Roman Stamp of Seneca's Tragedies," *AJPh* 60 (1939) 222: "Characters are white or black, right against wrong, and not one mixture of right and wrong against another mixture of right and wrong, as in Greek tragedy. This is what we should expect in a drama concerned with amusement rather than with edification, played before an audience concerned with intensity rather than with balance." What is believed to be a more fundamental explanation of this characteristic is presented in this paper.

⁸ *Clem.* 2.4.4-5.1, 5.4-5, 6.1 and 4. See E. Vernon Arnold, *Roman Stoicism* (Cambridge, 1911) 340; also W. C. Korfmacher, "Stoic Apatheia and Seneca's *De Clementia*," *TAPhA* 77 (1946) 52.

⁹ *Ep.* 9.1 and 3; *Prov.* 2.2; *Brev. Vit.* 14.2; *Cons. Polyb.* 17.2.

more moderate.¹⁰ But aside from these small distinctions, which are not clearly maintained, Seneca presents essentially the Stoic dogma that happiness consists in the development of a strong and upright spirit which conquers both internal and external evil.¹¹

It is unnecessary to illustrate in detail from Seneca's essays the well-known principles constituting the Stoic bulwark against the internal weaknesses of anger, fear, suspicion, envy, greed, pride, and the external troubles of fortune, violence, death, poverty, or disease. In this analysis the important fact is that for Seneca as a Stoic all good and all evil can be resolved to the qualities of virtue and vice. To use his own words: *ne quid aut bonum aut malum existimes, quod nec virtute nec malitia continget* (*Vit. Beat.* 16.1); and: *unum malum turpitudine*.¹² Another formulation of this dogma is basic in the machinery of Senecan drama, namely, the idea that all good and evil can be reduced to the pre-eminence of reason or passion. Seneca the philosopher makes this explicit: *adfectus et ratio in melius peiusque mutatio animi est* (*Ira* 1.8.3); *confusam vitam et perturbatam inpotentes agunt* (*Ep.* 105.7); (*adfectus*) *contundi debere* (*Brev. Vit.* 10.1). Anger, the most prominent passion in the plays, is the greatest anathema, transforming reason itself into passion (*Ira* 1.8.2). This emotion, like all other evils according to the Stoic, is a matter of character: *nec interest, ex quam magna causa nascatur, sed in qualem perveniat animum* (*Ep.* 18.15). The essays present again and again the concept that self-control through reason cancels evil, but that, when reason flees, weakness and passion produce disaster. Here we have the source of the difference observed between the Euripidean and Senecan plays.

The extent of agreement between Seneca's philosophical and dramatic ideas can be shown in another respect which it is important to consider because of past misunderstanding. A false distinction has been drawn between the views of Seneca as a philosopher who believed in predestination and the views of Seneca as a poet who emphasized the role of fortune.¹³ Actually there is close correspondence between the two. Seneca the philosopher believed in

¹⁰ *Ep.* 13.4; 82.8-9. The uncertainty in Seneca's thinking on this point can be seen in 13.4: *omittamus haec magna verba, sed, di boni, vera*.

¹¹ *Ep.* 9.13; 71.26; 91.15; 98.2; 117.33, etc.

¹² *Vit. Beat.* 4.3; see also *Ep.* 94.8.

¹³ Mendell, *op. cit.* (above, note 2) 153 f. See my review of Mendell, *CPh* 38 (1943) 146, and Marti, *op. cit.* (above, note 3) note 18.

fortune as well as in fate. In the essays, divine law controls the universe (*Ep.* 76.23). But Seneca seems to regard this ultimate power as having three different aspects, fate, fortune, and gods.¹⁴ God may be called fate (*Ben.* 4.7.2); god decreed the fates but himself follows them (*Prov.* 5.8). What is attributed to fortune may be directed by strict law (*Ep.* 117.19). Fate, fortune, and the gods are interrelated as in a kind of trinity. In a manner quite consistent with this, the three forces are mingled in the plays.¹⁵

In fact, it is not too much to say that most of the ideas and attitudes in the plays are the product or outgrowth of the thought of Seneca as a Stoic concerning the large issues which have been illustrated from his essays. This appears clearly when it is seen that the plays embody a positive and a negative application of Stoic thought to the presentation of dramatic themes. The positive or true Stoic aspect is found in all the choral passages concerning fate, moderation, fortune, death, kingship, love, endurance, and similar themes. Even though the themes are conventional and as a rule artistically faulty in their lack of organic relation to the dramatic action, these passages are based upon the standard Stoic doctrine that virtue is the only protection against the flux of existence. The positive aspect is also to be found in some of the characters. We have previously noticed the endurance of Astyanax and Polyxena in the *Troades*. The boy Tantalus behaves similarly in the *Thyestes* (720-721), Hercules perishes with the superhuman fortitude of a true Stoic hero, Hippolytus thinks in part like a Stoic (*Phaed.* 559-564), and Jocasta reproves Oedipus' cowardice in Stoic terms (*Oed.* 81-86). Thyestes holds Stoic views on simplicity and contentment (*Thy.* 446-470, 927-933), and Antigone tries to instil endurance in her father (*Phoen.* 77-79, 188-199).

But the negative or un-Stoic aspect predominates because of the Stoic moralistic explanation that it is corruption or weakness of character which causes such crimes and disasters as were the traditional subject matter of tragedy. It is primarily upon this prevalent element that Miss Marti builds her interpretation: that *ms E* preserves the original sequence of dramas deliberately arranged by Seneca to give moral instruction in neo-Stoicism by a series of

¹⁴ *Ben.* 4.8.3. In *Ep.* 16.4-5 this grouping is one of the several possible explanations.

¹⁵ For example, in *Tro.* 259 and 262 fortune and the gods are equated; fortune and fate seem synonymous in *Oed.* 11 and 28.

problem-plays, beginning with the passion of Hercules, followed by three groups of plays dealing with religion, psychology, and ethics respectively, and concluded by the apotheosis of Hercules as a Stoic hero. There is great value in her interpretation. Particularly significant is her analysis of the relationship between Stoic psychology and the delineation of destructive passion in the characters of Medea, Phaedra, and Deianira, a relationship which extends even to the descriptions of the physical manifestations of passion in the plays and in the essays.¹⁶ But her theory concerning Seneca's purpose and the sequence of the plays raises doubts when precisely applied, since it involves the question whether the dramatist's interest was primarily literary or philosophical, and her argumentation seems in part strained.¹⁷ The demonstration of the relationship between Senecan drama and Stoicism need not depend upon any such theory. It is a matter of showing, as is attempted here, that in fact the Senecan plays embody principles and attitudes which are the natural product of their author's absorption in Stoicism and have basically shaped the nature of his drama.

The negative aspect of Stoicism is found throughout the plays. The passionate criminality of the Greeks in the *Troades*,¹⁸ of Medea, Phaedra, and Deianira has already been mentioned.¹⁹ In the

¹⁶ Marti, *op. cit.* (above, note 3) 229-234 and 243.

¹⁷ For example, it is doubtful that the *Troades* and *Phoenissae* can be summarized by saying that they "represent men and women who, in their rebellion against the injustice of their fate, question the goodness of Providence" (221). It is not clear that the *Hercules Furens* represents the passion of Hercules as a Stoic hero (there are touches of the un-Stoic in Hercules; he certainly does not undergo his trials "so serenely" [225]), nor that "Juno is meant to represent Fate and the external powers which seem unjustly to persecute mankind" (note 27). Also dubious is the idea that the *Oedipus*, *Agamemnon*, and *Thyestes* are a unique group dealing with ethics; the suggestion that this group was inspired by Plato's myth of Er is very tenuous.

In my opinion, Miss Marti has not strengthened her theory by a second article, "The Prototypes of Seneca's Tragedies," *CPh* 42 (1947) 1-16. The attempt to establish a connection between the tragedies of Diogenes and the Senecan plays is not very convincing. In any event, Diogenes' popular presentation of technical philosophy in drama seems to have been fundamentally different from Seneca's moralistic interpretation of dramatic themes. Equally uncertain is the evidence that Varro was the link between Diogenes' method and Seneca.

¹⁸ The Stoic implications of the victors' behavior appear from *Ben.* 4.37.2 and 7.27.1-2, where the qualities of a good general are held to be incompatible with virtue, and life is portrayed in terms of the lust of victors.

¹⁹ In Phaedra's case, the defeat of reason by passion is explicitly marked: *quid ratio possit? vicit ac regnat furor potensque tota mente dominatur deus* (*Phaed.* 184-185).

Phaedra also, Theseus is lustful (97-98) and wrathful (1207); the nurse abandons her rationality because of fear (267-273) and yields to crime (721-724); Hippolytus is moved by hate (230, 566-573, 578-579). Oedipus is fearful (*Oed.* 27, 206), mad (103), wrathful (518-519) and headstrong (864-865). Both he and Jocasta show the familiar physical signs of mad passion (957-962, 1004-1009). According to Laius, Thebes is racked not by divine wrath but by crime (630-631). The same tone of un-Stoic passionateness prevails throughout the *Oedipus* and produces a state of annihilation at its close.

In the *Agamemnon*, Thyestes is the spirit of mad vengeance. Clytemnestra abandons herself to wrong because of her violent emotions of fear, pain, jealousy, and love (131-135). Aegisthus is fully aware of his villainy (231). Agamemnon is full of glory and pretension (400a-401a). When Cassandra falls under prophetic spell, her reaction is described in the characteristically Senecan manner of showing how madness destroys self-control (710-719). Tantalus in the prologue of the *Thyestes* is the spirit of evil and madness.²⁰ Atreus is the complete villain abandoned to monstrous crime. In the fragmentary *Phoenissae*, Oedipus has an intense feeling of sinfulness (158); Polynices and Eteocles are insanely driven by passion and lust for power (299, 302).

The Hercules-plays also contain un-Stoic elements in addition to the passion of love-crazed Deianira. In the *Furens*, Juno is the spirit of revenge, jealousy, fear, and hate, the very spirit of passion allied with discord, crime, impiety, and madness (92-98). Lycus is a low criminal quite aware of his guilt (406-407). Even Hercules has his weakness. In his courage there is an excess which causes disaster (186-187, 201). The *Oetaeus* shows that his virtue takes him among the gods (1942-1943), but the captive women have felt his anger (172), and Deianira has reason to complain of his lust (363-377).

From this it seems clear that the content of the choral passages and the delineation of character are largely dominated by Stoic thought concerning the negation and causation of evil. There are also more subtle manifestations of this influence. The conflict

²⁰ Stoic terminology appears throughout the portrayal of evil in the plays. For example, the fury instructs Tantalus as follows: *ne sit irarum modus pudorve, mentes caecus instiget furor* (26-27).

between reason and passion, so fundamental in Stoicism, permeates the plays and has made a deep imprint upon their nature. For example, the character of the nurse or confidante, which develops into a conventional role in Seneca, seems primarily to be the voice of reason raised against passion.²¹ Also, rhetoric and the conflict between reason and passion are the elements used by Seneca in his powerful portrayal of introspection throughout the plays.²² This philosophical conflict is thus basic in the introspective monologue which has so greatly influenced the expression of inner feeling and the portrayal of inner nature in drama subsequent to Seneca. As part of the study of Seneca which remains to be done, it may be mentioned that Seneca's technique in relation to such phenomena as introspection would be greatly illuminated by analysis conducted in the framework of Stoic psychology.

The deep-seated presence of Stoic elements in the plays may be indicated by another instance. The prevailing tone of this drama is violence and emotional intensity. To explain these qualities completely, it is necessary to consider the tradition of Latin literature before Seneca, the conditions of literature in his own time, the violence of the Neronian period, and Seneca's training in rhetoric. But there is also a definite Stoic foundation of this prevailing tone, and again our explanation involves Stoic thought concerning evil. The *De Providentia* presents the question why good men are allowed to suffer, and the conventional answer that misfortune is intended to test and develop man's spirit (1.6). Adversity is merely discipline for virtue: *pro ipsis esse quibus eveniunt ista quae horremus ac tremimus* (3.2). From this it follows that evil is to be welcomed: *praebendi fortunae sumus, ut contra illam ab ipsa duremur* (4.12).

The essays are full of this glorying in adversity and violence. And the great conflict between endurance and the violence which may occur, especially in the conditions of Seneca's lifetime,²³ creates high emotional intensity compounded of hope, desperation, and

²¹ This is especially clear in the nurse of the *Phaedra* who at first voices Stoic ideas (195-217), then, succumbing to fear of Phaedra's suicide, with criminal intent urges Epicurean thoughts upon Hippolytus (435-482).

²² The typical form of the debate between passion and better nature is found in *H.O.* 278-314.

²³ The close connection between contemporary conditions and Seneca's treatment of violence appears in such passages as *Ep.* 14.4-5, where there may be some connection of thought with tragic themes, and *Brev. Vit.* 18.6.

reckless struggle with the most extreme forms of violence. Under the influence of rhetoric, Seneca demonstrates the strength of Stoicism by magnifying opposing forces, by reveling in horror and torment, as if to show that the greater the pain and violence, the greater is the victory over them. Man is a bloodied gladiator: ille, qui sanguinem suum vidit, cuius dentes crepuere sub pugno . . . cum magna spe descendit ad pugnam (*Ep.* 13.2); or life is a battle (*Ep.* 51.6; 96.5) in which the body is a buffer against fortune to protect the soul (*Ep.* 65.21). For Seneca as a philosopher, torture has a fascination (*Ep.* 66.43). The glory of pain is illustrated again and again by the cases of Scaevola, Cato, Regulus, and others.²⁴ Contemplation of death, poverty, temptation, and suffering affords a stern kind of joy (*Ep.* 23.4). Seneca even provides a glimpse of the connection between this thought and the treatment of dramatic themes when he says, ego mortem eodem voltu comoediamque videbo (*Vit. Beat.* 20.3) and asks, ego Herculem fleam, quod vivus uritur—when it was merely a way to immortality? (*Tranq.* 16.4). The attitude may be expressed by the words: ecce res magna, habere inbecillitatem hominis, securitatem dei (*Ep.* 53.12).

Intense luxuriation in violence is a most obvious element in the plays. One aspect is the desperate gesture, often found in Senecan characters, of trying to achieve some kind of serenity in the face of catastrophe by throwing themselves in the teeth of violence or by overcoming violence with greater violence, as when Electra offers herself to death (*Ag.* 945–946) or Hercules threatens to surpass all his labors by killing himself (*H.F.* 1281–1282). This is related to the attitude of stoical “self-dramatization” which T. S. Eliot has traced from Seneca to Shakespeare.²⁵ In general, the prevalence of high pitch and violence in Senecan drama is completely consistent with the Stoic view that passion is rampant in nature and with the militant Stoic defense against adversity.

Such, then, is the relationship between the essays and the plays, analyzed as groundwork for continued study. Stoicism shaped the nature of this drama both in superficial and in fundamental ways. The influence of philosophy is much deeper than any simple corre-

²⁴ *Ep.* 66.51; 95.72; 98.12; 104.29; *Prov.* 3.4 f. The intensity of this reveling in horror is shown by the picture of Cato tearing open his wound (*Ep.* 67.7 and 13; 71.17), a thought which Seneca applies to the consolation of his mother! (*Cons. Helv.* 2.1–3).

²⁵ “Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca,” *Selected Essays 1917–1932* (New York, 1932) 110–112.

spondence between the themes of the two genres. Stoic dogma concerning evil and the conflict between reason and passion lies beneath the plays in various aspects including choral passages, concept of character, introspection, and tone, to a degree which amounts to a distinctive concept of the tragic. For a complete analysis, it will be necessary to show the union of this philosophical aspect with the literary and rhetorical. But here at least we have one of the components of the originality of Senecan drama, and an approach to a more adequate understanding of its nature and great historical influence. Stoicism contributed largely to make Senecan drama a drama of character, full of strong emotions and violence, and marked by intensity of tone: a landmark, in fact, in the development of psychological drama.