

## INTRODUCTION: SENECA IN THE ENGLISH TRADITION

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In his long and typically astute essay on Elizabethan translations of the younger Seneca, written in 1927, T.S. Eliot wryly observed, “in modern times, few Latin authors have been more consistently damned.” He continues: “we must admit...that the tragedies of Seneca deserve the censure that has been directed upon them” (Eliot 66-7). Eliot is of course not so critical of Seneca as this selective quotation would suggest; indeed, Eliot’s essay could be said to be the start of the critical revival of Seneca’s fortunes in the twentieth century. To get a flavour of the contempt in which Senecan drama was once held, we need only recall Leo’s (in)famous aside in 1878 on the vagaries of the survival of classical texts: “libenter ...Ovidii Medea novem Senecae tragoedias venderemus” (149).<sup>1</sup> Or, with even less restraint, Lucas’ denunciation:

[Seneca’s] heroes are megalomaniacs, his virgins viragos; his very infants die with the callousness of Stoic philosophers. His Hercules is a gladiator; his Oedipus a bedlamite. Courage in him becomes suicidal mania; fortitude a perverse lust for torture. He cannot poison a woman without a pharmacopoeia; he cannot raise a ghost without letting loose all the damned souls in Hell.

But as a *reductio ad nauseam* of the whole tasteless barbarism the Messenger’s story of the self-blinding of Oedipus will serve.

At which point he quotes, though apparently without relish, those seventeen accursed lines (*Oed.* 953-69). He concludes: “So it goes on: but we, thank Heaven, need not” (63).

Such condemnation of Senecan tragedy was common. Since the eighteenth century and the emergent dominance of Greece in literary, cultural, and philosophical imaginations, Seneca’s dramatic corpus has been judged an inferior derivative of fifth-century Athenian tragedy and consequently as an embarrassing Roman anom-

ally in the smooth progress and trajectory of classical and classicising theatre; Seneca's tragedies, like Roman statues, become the poor copies of Greek originals. Following the influential work of A.W. Schlegel on the theatrical canon (with its damning critique and exclusion of Seneca) and on the 'perfection' of the classical (by which was meant Greek culture and art), Seneca's tragedies, long the model for tragic theatre, passed soundly out of favour. Coupled with the nineteenth-century distaste for the violent theatrical display and the rise of naturalistic and realistic theatre in the mid to late nineteenth century (as exemplified by Ibsen and Strindberg), Senecan tragedy, the 'senecan' (to use a term coined in this volume), became an impossible theatrical mode.<sup>2</sup> Even at the end of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth, with the rise of the various avant-gardist and modernist literary movements, there could be no easy recovery of Senecan drama. Too much associated with the established European dramatic tradition (from Shakespeare to Corneille and Racine), and at the same time lacking the authoritative fascination of classical Greek art or the palimpsestic allure

8 of the Greek fragment, Seneca's drama continued to wait off-stage.

Yet the last few decades have seen a reinstating of Seneca *qua* dramatist. Central to this re-evaluation of Seneca's drama is the frequent emphasis on not only—and crucially—the performability of the plays (doubted by earlier scholarship, which saw them as recitation pieces, closet dramas), but also the literary and intellectual validity of the declamatory style, the bombast, with focus on the (all-too-modern?) self-conscious display, the self-reflection, of the Senecan rhetorical stage. Right at the heart of this more positive trend of Senecan scholarship is the tracing of the appropriation of Seneca by the early moderns, with their own enthusiastic embrace of violent rhetoric and self-reflexivity. Seneca's language, once condemned, became a compelling medium for the expression of the modern condition. Senecan tragedy becomes, therefore, a fascinating case-history for reception studies: it is arguable that it has, in the last thirty years, been recovered from ignominy *precisely because* of its literary afterlife.

Scholars seeking to recover and re-appropriate Seneca for the classical canon now proudly cite him as the foundational source for European theatre, particularly the drama of the Renaissance, an apologetic emphasis which reveals the implied need to find some form of qualitative justification for his influence. Therefore, through the prism of changing attitudes and criticism, Senecan drama offers a unique perspective for any study of reception and transmission. For it becomes clear that the issue at stake in the discussion and evaluation of Seneca's drama is in fact the ways in which scholars draw the lines between Seneca and Greek theatre, the Renaissance and Seneca, and Seneca and ourselves, and so on. An examination of his drama, its reception, and the scholarship it has provoked thus highlights explicitly the importance of incorporating an understanding of how, whether and why we read texts as we do.

Senecan drama, then, is always already read through the lens of its history, its genealogy. The dominant and pervasive scholarly construction of Seneca's drama as

part of a theatrical tradition and—perhaps more curiously and anachronistically—an assumed trajectory lends a particular tone to its scholarly criticism. Reading and studying Seneca is always a question of reception and traditions of reading. A brief glance at the scholarship on Senecan tragedy seems to dramatise very obviously that

our current interpretations of ancient texts, whether or not we are aware of it, are, in complex ways, constructed by the chain of receptions through which their continued readability has been effected. As a result we cannot get back to any originary meaning wholly free of subsequent accretions. (Martindale 7)

Seneca's fortunes, then, have waxed and waned. The study of the early modern reception of his work, coupled with the recuperation of 'Silver' Latin more generally within classical scholarship in the last three decades, and set against a backdrop of the twentieth-century theatrical recovery of Senecan drama, means that Seneca's place in the canon is once again affirmed. *The Blackwell Companion to the Neronian Age* and the forthcoming *Cambridge Companion to Seneca* and *Cambridge Companion to the Age of Nero* (amongst other recent publications) testify to the centrality of both Seneca and Silver Latin within Classical Studies (and beyond). This volume accords with this scholarly trend, but also seeks to re-emphasise the historical and on-going importance of Senecan tragedy within the English tradition.

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It is difficult to describe or understand exactly the dynamics of reception, to weave together into a comprehensible pattern all the various threads of appropriation. A text or texts may be re-read, re-interpreted, and mined for new creative inspiration for a variety of reasons: popularity; the personal predilection of the reader; in earlier moments in history, simply the availability of an edition or translation of a given text can determine what flourishes, and what does not; dominant intellectual trends; and so on. Yet what must somehow unite, or stand out as the mark of similarity between, various appropriations is some kind of sense of the *relevance*—however that may be construed, and whatever form it may take—of a text or author.

This sense of relevance is necessarily at work in the reception of Seneca. The essays in this special issue are clustered around two particularly marked historical moments of Senecan reception: the early modern and the modern. While the emphasis is largely on the dramatic Seneca because of the literary, rather than straightforwardly philosophical, focus of the figures discussed in this volume, it should be observed that the separation between Seneca the tragedian and Seneca the philosopher was, for both the early moderns, and indeed the modern writers and dramatists discussed here, not so distinct as contemporary scholarship sometimes suggests.

That Senecan drama, in particular, should have featured so heavily during the early modern period is unsurprising. Widely circulated in Renaissance Europe in both Latin editions and translations into several European languages, Seneca's tragedy, by virtue of its accessibility via the *lingua franca* of the age, became the exemplary cross-cultural model for classical tragic drama. When the early modern English writers and dramatists discussed in this volume engaged with Seneca, they did so against a

backdrop of a Europe-wide phenomenon (see, e.g., Krayer). For the modern era, the new ‘renaissance’ of Senecan tragedy may be understood by its expression of linguistic and tragic excess and contorted self-reflexive fatalism, gestures all too fitting to a century both riven by its own kind of tragic horror and marked by an emergent sense of (postmodern?) irony. Both periods responded to Seneca’s drama and philosophy by recasting them as vehicles for engaging with the problems and concerns of their respective ages, Seneca’s rhetorical bombast and dramatic violence on the one hand, and his stoicism (whether in the letters or in the tragedies themselves) on the other, offering pleasingly contradictory tools to think with.

What emerges from these articles are the plural, yet often uncannily similar, ways in which key Senecan themes—violence, linguistic excess, self-reflexivity, political and natural disorder—attract and fascinate his later readers, translators, and dramatic heirs: it is these aspects of his corpus which seem to appear over and again across time. Broadly speaking, we could argue that, during the early modern and

**10** Restoration periods, these motifs were mobilised both to provide a platform for political debate (of whatever hue) and a vocabulary and dramatic form for an emergent discourse of self-representation and self-fashioning. For the moderns, Seneca becomes a means to give voice to a century whose horrors and sense of the exhaustion of the political have resulted in a self-reflexive and stunned interiority.

Emma Buckley’s essay about Matthew Gwinne’s *Nero* (1603), an academic Latin play written for performance at St John’s, Oxford, argues that the play should be reappraised with less damning critical assessment. University plays, particularly those in Latin, have been traditionally accused of being academic exercises rather than vibrant theatre, since often their authors were forced by anti-theatrical prejudice to justify their plays’ very existence in homiletic terms. In the ‘Momus controversy’ (1592-99), William Gager and John Rainolds engaged in a heated exchange of letters in which Gager sought to refute Rainolds’ anti-theatricalism. Dana F. Sutton has convincingly connected ‘Momus’, a character in *Nero*, directly to Gager, leading Buckley to discover in Gwinne an anti-theatrical engagement which reconfigures his use of Seneca. And, she argues, an examination of Gwinne’s Seneca, reliant on the characterisation of the playwright found in *Octavia* (attr. to Seneca), complicates the classification of the play as straightforwardly ‘homiletic’. In fact, Gwinne’s intertextual strategy—one which draws attention to the cost of obedience to authority in the person of Seneca himself—helps to think through contemporary debates about Divine Right in a much more ‘resistant’ way than a homiletic text would dictate. Despite *Nero*’s outwardly academic form and purpose—marginal notes stuffed with references—Buckley makes a good case for it as a less ‘safe’ use of Seneca, making a pointed intervention in political discourse in the dangerous wake of the Essex rebellion. The essay also draws attention to a novel form of Senecan reception in the English tradition in which intertextuality, dexterously suggestive repetition from classical sources (helped by the Latin of Gwinne’s text) and the outfacing of Senecan rhetoric in Euphuism’s further ratcheting up of emotive language combine to make

something sophisticatedly new. If, ultimately, Buckley concludes that Gwinne's flirtation with dangerous monarchomach doctrine is just that, *Nero* is at least brave in scope and offered its audiences a space in which to think about some of the most vexed political issues of the day.

Political engagement is to the fore again in the next piece, Teresa Grant's discussion of the Royalist Shirley-Stanley circle's corporate translation project which encompassed both Seneca tragicus and philosophus in the years surrounding Charles I's defeat and execution. The seventeenth-century fashion for neo-Stoicism, espoused by Charles himself and some of his most trusted councillors, had encouraged a rediscovery of Seneca not only in the English tradition but also across continental Europe. Justus Lipsius' masterly edition of the Latin works (1605) and Thomas Farnaby's *L. et M. Senecae Tragoediae* (1613) encouraged Cavalier poets, some of whom had been taught by Farnaby, to use Senecan translation politically to discuss ways of living well under conditions of tyranny. The same tensions which Buckley argued that Gwinne's *Nero* brought out in Seneca's character—from early exile through participation in a tyrannous regime and ending in a Stoical death—struck a chord with dispossessed Royalists who were searching for ethical ways to survive under what they saw as Commonwealth tyranny, perhaps especially of the Press (see Potter 4-6). Grant also argues that Seneca's writings on friendship, particularly in the *Epistles*, allowed the Stanley circle to contemplate their fellowship on Senecan lines which encouraged philosophical interaction as an improving measure and as ballast against adversity. This is not to say that friends, as external to a philosopher's existence, could be practically useful but that the intercourse of virtuous men had the capacity to promote virtue in each other, a virtue which showed the good Stoic how to stand strong against the hope and fear of human existence. Furthermore, Seneca's own intertextual sinousness—his re-using of Greek drama, and of Virgilian and Ovidian modes, the strong sense his works give of the literary tradition derived from his sources—offered a paradigm to Royalist authors seeking to continue their own literary tradition in the face of the wholesale sweeping away of the political *status quo*. By translating Seneca they fix themselves at the end of this line, giving themselves a pedigree which their activities will maintain until better days return.

Helen Slaney's article deals with the return of those better days, focusing on Restoration drama's use of Seneca, especially in the work of Nathaniel Lee. Despite the interest in earlier seventeenth-century drama influenced by Seneca, critical attention has been slow to turn to the Restoration even though there is significant material to scrutinise. Slaney makes a distinction between Senecan and senecan elements. The former denotes overt allusions to Senecan tragedy which might involve quotations, plot-points and typical vocabulary, while the latter those more elusive stylistic echoes which, she suggests, include the stimulation of horror over terror, the use of highly figured, non-mimetic dramatic language and of characters under the control of their passions. A particularly fertile time for new senecan drama was the Exclusion Crisis (1678-81), which saw the production of John Crowne's *Thyestes*,

Edward Ravenscroft's Thyestean *Titus Andronicus*, and the Dryden/Lee *Oedipus*, which like other early modern uses of Senecan sources made political comment through analogy, in this case on 'sick' England and the parallels between the houses of Atreus and Stuart. As if only waiting for a political crisis of sufficient gravity, this high point of Restoration senecanism and its aesthetics of horror was a triumphant culmination of earlier witty experiments such as Nathaniel Lee's *Nero* and Elkanah Settle's *Empress of Morocco*. Slaney reassesses Lee, tracing his experiment throughout his career with the application of senecan discourse, especially in his use of visceral language attempting to make its audience 'feel' the extreme sensation of Senecan passion. Thus, Slaney suggests 'hypertragedy' as a useful term for a dramatic aesthetic focused on the extreme, characteristic of both Lee's and Seneca's writings. But ultimately, this history also reveals the end of a road for Senecan language, Slaney arguing that Lee increasingly privileges spectacle over rhetoric in his development of a dramaturgy of excess derived from Seneca. Lee's work gives us Seneca and senecanism in transition between the properly Senecan rediscovery of Elizabethan to Caroline drama and a Restoration preference for dialogue, action and complex plots which, it might be argued, arrested English drama's enthusiastic interaction with Seneca—until a second blossoming in modernity.

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Mairéad McAuley's essay on Seneca and psychoanalysis usefully bridges this historical gap for us, situating as it does Seneca's *Oedipus* in the role of the repressed in Freud's readings of *Hamlet* and Sophocles. McAuley argues that despite being aware of a Latinised version through his reading of Leopold Constans' *La Légende d'Oedipe* (1881), Freud does not use Seneca's painfully self-aware protagonist in his construction of psychoanalysis. Freud's intertextual readings in Greek and Renaissance tragedy 'created' psychoanalysis and it is on these texts that the theories both work best and verify themselves. But there is an interesting lacuna, one which McAuley takes as fundamental: Shakespeare's contemporaries, of course, based their tragedies on Senecan, not Greek sources. Moreover, Oedipus and other Senecan characters articulate a notion of self driven by forces beyond their control, in terms akin to Freud's perverse impulses and unconscious guilt, despite the fact that Seneca does not feature as material for Freud's theory. McAuley's reading of *Troades* draws attention to the critical potential of this relation of anachronism and absence, for both Seneca and psychoanalysis. Andromache's concealment of her son Astyanax in his father's tomb can be read as an anticipatory gloss on the uncanny, fetish and repetition compulsion, and to the maternal body as locus of birth and death. Yet Andromache's dilemma—whether to save her son or her dead husband's remains—exposes absences and elisions in Freud's Oedipal theory. Freud's reading of Sophocles is a 'progress through return' which uncovers meanings which its author could not see, a process which McAuley sees as analogous to the excavation of origins which psychoanalysis uses to search truth. When Freud finds Hamlet in Sophocles and in the process 'discovers' repression, McAuley argues that it is the Senecan tradition that uncannily constitutes both the repressed and the agent of repression. The recursive temporality

of Senecan tragedy compels a persistent return to repressed feminine origins, deeply problematising the ‘proof’ of Freudian method and implicating us all in a narrative of ambivalence.

Two perspectives on Ted Hughes’s classicism follow: one (Stead) a discussion of his method, one (Fleming) on how his translation affected the wider body of his work. Henry Stead’s investigation of the Ted Hughes archive at Liverpool University has unearthed material which reveals new information about the relationship between Hughes’s *Seneca’s Oedipus* (1968/9) and the original script for the National Theatre production which Hughes was initially brought in to ‘poetise’ for Peter Hall. David Turner had produced an entire translation of the play when Hughes was brought in, ostensibly because Hall’s vision of the play did not accord with Turner’s. Stead traces Hughes’s method meticulously, noting the verbal echoes in *Seneca’s Oedipus* from both Turner’s version and the Loeb ‘crib’ by Frank Justus Miller, which Hughes owned to using to ‘eke out [his] Latin’ when it was decided some time into the project that going back to Seneca’s text was preferable. What emerges from this process, and from the various draft versions of Hughes’s description of it, is that he may have been a little disingenuous in owning the help he received from Turner’s and Miller’s translations. Stead sees this partly as a copyright issue, prompted by Hughes’s financial insecurity, but also, more interestingly, as an expression of insecurity on Hughes’s part about the extent of his own Latinity, and the need he seems to have felt to display a ‘direct engagement’ with Seneca’s text. The essay describes the construction of a ‘composition myth’ which sophisticates ‘working from the Turner and the American ...translation Miller’ into an ‘occasional glance at the original’ and recounts Brook, Gielgud, Irene Worth and Hughes ‘examining...every key epithet, verb and phrase’ together. For Stead what is most interesting about this narrative is the anxieties it reveals about class and education in the 1960s (and by implication today), as well as the questions it poses about the reliability of translators’ accounts of their own theory and practice. If the essay finally concludes that *Seneca’s Oedipus* is, as Hughes’s sister claimed, his ‘own original creation which anyone familiar with his work can immediately recognise’, it does find the poet guilty of contravening some kind of literary honour code in the process.

Katie Fleming’s work picks up from Stead’s when it details the echoes across Hughes’s *oeuvre* as a result of his engagement with Seneca’s *Oedipus*. Post ‘Holocaust, the Gulags, Hiroshima’, what Brian Arkins calls the ‘radically evil’ world of Seneca’s plays seems particularly good to think with, for Arkins offering a tortured mirror of contemporaneity. In fact, Fleming argues, Hughes’s own conception of poetic responsibility and purpose is more bullish—a knowing provocation of Nature’s vital violence—a complex ethical impulse. The essay takes issue with readings of Hughes’s poetry in which a romanticised version of the world is simply being refuted by his ‘nature’, arguing instead that there are sophisticated and alarming ethical implications to the poetic violence. Hughes’s engagement with the Oedipus myth in Seneca’s play is appropriated into his ‘Crow’ cycle, an original implementation which is essen-

tial in his critique of enlightenment. Fleming gives readings of the poems—including the central ‘Oedipus Crow’—which put considerable pressure on any twentieth-century privilege of enlightenment, revealing the tragic, Oedipal, equation, that one may be simultaneously and inevitably innocent and guilty. The emergence of *Seneca’s Oedipus*, rather than Sophocles’, as Hughes’s working out of the monstrous, mythical tragic equation of human being is telling. The Greek’s ‘radiant moral world’ has no place for the anti-tragic Oedipal Crow. Finally, Seneca and Hughes are post-tragic, loaded with a dramatic irony and self-conscious fatalism.

- As the last essay by Elizabeth Barry describes, the world of Sarah Kane’s *Phaedra’s Love* (1996) bears no relation to Sophoclean moral radiance. Kane’s reworking of Seneca’s play was inspired by seeing Caryl Churchill’s *Thyestes* (1991) and she chose *Phaedra* herself when she was asked by the Gate Theatre to contribute to their season of rewritten classics. Kane was anxious to distance herself from a classical tradition, rejecting the notion that the Senecan source need inform the audience’s understanding of her play. In her updating Kane’s Hippolytus is as promiscuous as Seneca’s is chaste, as ugly as he is beautiful and in place of hunting in the wilderness he stays inside and watches telly. But, Barry argues, Kane captures something ineffable in this post-modern creation, one which does (even despite her protestations) speak to the Senecan source in some real way. Not only do the playwrights share a penchant for grotesque horror—Kane’s earlier *Blasted* contains the eating of a child, mutilation and a failed burial—Barry sees Kane’s dark humour nourished by her engagement (in Churchill’s work and in her own) with Seneca. While *Blasted* does have laconic humour, it becomes more comically playful in *Phaedra’s Love*, encouraged perhaps by the ‘metaliterary self-awareness’ of Seneca’s characters, an arch detachment which plays out into *Phaedra’s Love*. Barry’s essay sees Kane’s Hippolytus, particularly, coming to inhabit some version of Seneca’s stoicism, accepting death if not quite gladly, at least without boredom. There are connections to be made between Kane’s work and Seneca’s, suggestive parallels and divergences in both style and substance which reveal their shared interest in tragedy, passion and particularly death. Despite Kane’s insistence that her work should ‘stand completely on its own’, and the fact that she claimed to have read *Phaedra* only once, some of Seneca’s essence leaked, perhaps willy-nilly, into Kane’s reworking.

This volume narrates, then, the continued relevance of Seneca, of Senecan tragedy. But it also serves, we hope, to remind readers of the centrality of the *reception* of Seneca to his historical (and scholarly) fortunes. Which Seneca will be relevant next remains to be seen.

## NOTES

1. “We would willingly swap the nine tragedies of Seneca for the *Medea* of Ovid.”
2. Slaney (“Schlegel”) has argued that the Senecan style can be seen to operate in the more ‘Gothic’ theatre of Shelley’s *The Cenci* (1818) and in the overwrought stylisation of Kleist’s *Penthesilea* (1811). But it is clear that, while elements of the ‘senecan’ persist in the nineteenth century, its previous claim to be the most dominant tragic mode is lost.