Seneca Tragicus in the Twentieth Century: Hugo Claus’ Adaptations of Thyestes, Oedipus and Phaedra

Betine van Zyl Smit

In the twentieth century the tragedies of Seneca once again came into vigorous life thanks to the renowned Flemish poet, playwright and novelist, Hugo Claus. Claus was the most prolific adaptor of Senecan tragedy for the modern stage. His versions1 of Seneca’s Thyestes (1966), Oedipus (1971) and Phaedra (1980) seized the attention and imagination of theatregoers in Belgium and the Netherlands and have all been staged numerous times. They have also been published. These adaptations represent significant and provocative interpretations of the ancient plays. This chapter investigates Claus’ engagement with Seneca’s texts, the ways in which he adapted them, performances of Claus’ new plays and their reception by critics and scholars.

It is remarkable that Claus’ adaptations of Senecan tragedies have found little resonance in the Anglophone world. They have not been published in English translation and have not been widely performed in English, although they have been translated into French and performed in France and Germany. Thus it is not surprising that there has been little scholarly work in English on these adaptations. Davis devotes less than two pages2 in his chapter on the reception of Seneca’s Thyestes to Claus’ version. Meyer’s discussion, in his book on Seneca’s Phaedra, of Claus’ adaptation is even briefer.3

Fortunately there have been some Flemish and Dutch scholars who have published studies of Claus’ reinterpretation of Seneca’s work. De Decker situates Claus’ Thyestes in his wider theatrical oeuvre in his study Over Claus’ toneel (About Claus’ plays),4 which was published in 1971 and thus preceded the other plays derived from Senecan tragedy. Van der Paardt provides enlightening analysis and commentary on Claus’ reworking of the Classics in various studies. His Als twee minnaars (Like two lovers), was written as an introductory lecture for a season of performances of Thyestes by Het Zuidelijk Toneel.

---

1 Hugo Claus includes “naar Seneca”, “after Seneca”, in the titles of each of these three plays, thus making their derivation from the Roman tragedian explicit.
2 Davis (2003: 130–32).
in 1991/2, while the concluding chapter of his *Antieke motieven in de moderne Nederlandse letterkunde* dealt with Claus’ *Phaedra*. Claus’ noteworthy engagement with the Oedipus myth and Seneca’s interpretation of it have been investigated by Claes in *Claus’ Oedipodie*, as well as by Decreus in *Van Oedipus naar Blindeman, van Seneca naar Claus*. Van der Paardt has also produced a short overview of the reception of Seneca’s texts in Claus’ *Thyestes, Oedipus* and *Phaedra* in *Wolken van Kwaad: Over Seneca en Hugo Claus* (*Clouds of Evil: About Seneca and Hugo Claus*). The most thorough analysis of Claus’ use of ancient literature is Claes’ volume, *De mot zit in de mythe: Hugo Claus en de oudheid* (*Moths have got into myth: Hugo Claus and antiquity*). Claes’ study embraces all Claus’ work: poetry, novels and plays, and discusses the classical allusions, references, translations, and adaptations. It is indispensable for any scholar wishing to explore this aspect of Claus’ work. “Claus classicus”, a chapter in Claes’ *Claus-reading* (1984), contains a summary of the more extensive book. It is a useful introduction to Claus’ relationship with antiquity and contains detailed discussions of his treatments of the tragedies of Seneca. It clearly emerges from the scholarly work that the attraction of the Roman tragedies for Claus lay not in their perfection, but in their flawed nature. He saw a link between what he called their “cheap shock tactics, with excessive horror and grand-guignol”\(^5\) and the sensationalist reporting of murder and accidents in modern newspapers.

It was precisely these characteristics of Seneca’s tragedies that had resulted in their low regard, even amongst scholars, in the first half of the twentieth century. So much so that even one of the French translators, Maurice Mignon, seemed convinced that only a handful of academics were still interested in the plays.\(^6\) Mignon, seems not to have been aware that there were already some influential figures presenting arguments for a reappraisal of Seneca’s tragedies. The two who are most pertinent to Claus’ preoccupation with Seneca were T.S. Eliot and Antonin Artaud.\(^7\) Artaud’s references to Seneca, and specifically to his *Thyestes*, date from the period when Mignon was translating the Latin tragedies. Eliot’s influential essay, *Seneca in Elizabethan Translation*, written as introduction for the 1927 republication of Thomas Newton’s collection of


\(^6\) Maurice Mignon (1961: 1, tr.): En dehors des étudiants, des professeurs et d’une poignée de spécialistes, qui donc lit aujourd’hui les tragédies de Sénèque? Et qui oserait plaider pour Sénèque le Tragique?

\(^7\) Van der Paardt (1982: 78–79) notes that Claus was attracted to Senecan tragedy because of Artaud’s admiration of Seneca and because of Eliot’s defence of Seneca’s predilection for bombastic rhetoric and his gruesome scenes and descriptions.