The presence of Seneca’s tragedies in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in France is remarkable, given its pivotal role in the history of French tragedy. At the birth of the genre in the 1550s and its renovation in 1634, playwrights draw abundantly from the Senecan corpus in composing their own works. The Senecan presence is remarkable, yet paradoxical, in truth, insofar as critics gradually emerge against the works of Seneca and become increasingly acerbic with time. The answer to this enigma lies in the contrast between the theoretical relationships, as opposed to the practical relationships, that authors establish with Seneca, who becomes a founding father of French tragedy.1

1 Seneca and the Birth of French Tragedy (1550–1610)

Interest in the ancient theater, noticeable since the Middle Ages, takes on a new dimension during the Renaissance of the sixteenth century. In addition

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1 A number of general studies on the history of tragedy in the Renaissance address the Senecan legacy: Émile Faguet (1883); Raymond Lebègue (1977; 1954; 1929); Henry Buckley Charlton (1946). A collection of articles compiled by Jean Jacquot (1964) offers a more precise approach, albeit a partial one, and in a comparative perspective between French, Spanish, Italian, and English tragedy. Finally, the study of Elliot Forsyth (1993) offers a more comprehensive timeline while excluding the pieces not relevant to revenge. Much information on the influence of Seneca in the seventeenth century is available in contemporary editions of the plays marked with the seal of the Latin playwright, but also in the works of Ronald Tobin (1971; 1999) or the important article by John Lapp (1964). Several studies treat the relationship between the model translation and imitation: e.g., Karl Böhm (1902); Otto Klucke (1884); Marie Delcourt-Curvers (1925). None of these analyses, however, offers a global view of Seneca’s influence, or the reasons behind it, during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. My recent work (2011), Sénèque le Tragique en France (xvi e–xvii e siècle), presents such a study, which this chapter condenses. The book’s bibliography contains a more complete picture of sources and studies (1071–1105).
to the rediscovery of the architecture of the ancient theater through architectural treatises, there is a proliferation of reprints and translations of classical texts: theoretical tracts, Greek and Latin works, several Latin translations of Greek tragedies, and no less than five editions of Seneca between 1512 and 1548. If these developments provide a better understanding of the ancient theater, and of tragedy in particular, the definition of the latter remains unclear. Theoretical reflections, often post-practice, partake of the Horatian tradition of the mid-century, but also reveal continuities with genres in vogue at the time, especially the morality play. While tragedy and the morality converge in the moralizing purpose both serve at the time, the nature of the characters and the misfortunes suffered in each genre differ. These differences may be due to the facts that the debate focuses on the French language, and that theorists and playwrights do not truly question tragedy as a genre until Jean de La Taille’s *Art de la tragédie* (1572). It is essential, then, to place the influence of Senecan drama in the context of the debate about the enrichment of the French language that haunts the period.

1.1 Imitating or Translating Seneca?
No less than thirteen of the tragedies composed in the second half of the sixteenth century take the works of Seneca as a model: Jean de La Pérouse’s *Médée* (1556); the *Agamemnon* of Charles Toustain (1556) and that of François Duchat (1561); Robert Garnier’s *Hippolyte* (1573), *Troade* (1579), and *Antigone* (1580); Pierre Matthieu’s *Clytemnestre* (1589); Roland Brisset’s *Hercule furieux, Thyeste, Agamemnon*, and *Octavie* (1589); the *Octavie* of Guillaume Regnault (1599); and the *Hippolyte* of Jean Yeuwain (1591). The playwright therefore leaves his mark at the very birth of French tragedy. The rediscovery of ancient theater offers only a partial explanation to this fact, and there is nothing obvious in the choice of Seneca as a dramaturgical model. Scholars such as Justus Lipsius and Daniel Heinsius, who distinguish up to four authors, challenge the attribution of the plays to Seneca, and the theorists have little to say: Joachim Du Bellay, in his *Défense et illustration de la langue française* (1547), is allusive in the models he prescribes; Jacques Peletier du Mans in his *Art poétique* (1555) finds him “weighty” and “obscure,” yet “nonetheless sententious and, with judgment, worthy of imitation” (quoted in Le Blanc 1972, 67). Jacques Grévin, lingering on the merits of the Greek dramatists in his *Brief discours pour l’intelligence du théâtre* (1561), does not mention Seneca’s name; Jean de La Taille puts him on the same level as “moules des anciens” (models of antiquity); Jean Vauquelin

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2 Especially Horace’s *Ars Poetica*, Diomedes’s *De grammatica*, and the *De tragoedia et comoedia* of Donatus.