CHAPTER 12

Nineteenth- and Early Twentieth-Century Receptions of Seneca Tragicus

Francesco Citti

1 Introduction

The negative judgment of authors like Schiller, Lessing and Schlegel greatly affected Seneca’s influence on nineteenth-century theater. However, significant examples of his influence are still evident. On one hand, the strong passion and family conflicts that characterize Senecan characters often emerge in the violent dramas of Shelley and Heinrich von Kleist. On the other hand, Senecan elements come together in some rewritings of his tragedies, in particular of Oedipus (as in the case of the neoclassical Martínez de la Rosa); Medea (sorceress and solitary heroine in Franz Grillparzer); and Phaedra (anti-puritan heroine in Swinburne, Titanic in Gabriele D’Annunzio, and Christian in Miguel de Unamuno). From the 1920s, in postwar Europe, mainly thanks to T. S. Eliot and Antonin Artaud, Seneca’s theater was favorably reappraised, imitated, translated, and finally brought back on stage with experimentations that often emphasize its characteristics as a theater of passions and words.

2 Seneca’s Dramas and His Detractors

Opinions about Seneca and the classical theater that he inspired were largely negative as early as the eighteenth century. For example, Johann Christoph Friedrich Schiller (in his first introduction to the tragedy The Robbers, Die Räuber, 1782), criticizes characters in the French theater by branding them as ‘Senecan’: “ice-cold observers of their own rage or pompous professors of their own passion.” Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, in his early essay On the Latin tragedies which go under Seneca’s name (Von den lateinischen Trauerspielen, welche unter dem Namen des Seneca bekannt sind, 1754), had alternating appreciation for their “strong descriptions of passions,” able to engage and impassion the readers, and criticism for their excessive rhetoric and artificiality.1 This

condemnation becomes stronger in the *Laocoon* (1766), where he asserts that the characters of tragedy must “manifest their feelings, give expression to their pains, and give full play to their natural emotion.” However, “the moment they appear to act under the influence of constraint and rule, they lose at once the power of touching our sensibilities, and bare admiration is all that we can award to the Stoic gladiator of the sock.” He concludes in a polemical mood: “such is the title which may with propriety be given to all the personages of what are called the tragedies of Seneca.” It was not only the public that was susceptible to these artificialities; indeed, “the best tragic genius, accustomed to these artificial death-scenes, could not avoid being betrayed into bombast and rodomontade.”

Even more severe was the criticism by August Wilhelm Schlegel, who, in his *Vorlesungen über dramatische Kunst und Litteratur* (*A course of Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature*, 1809), doubted that works of such poor taste could actually be attributed to Seneca:

> Whatever period may have given birth to the tragedies of Seneca, they are beyond description bombastic and frigid, unnaturally both in character and action, revolting from their violation of propriety, and so destitute of theatrical effect, that I believe they were never meant to leave the rhetorical schools for the stage. 3

For Schlegel, too, rhetoric prevails over character and content: “All is phrase […]. A total poverty of sentiment is dressed out with wit and acuteness.”4 These observations had a powerful impact on the critical debate, where the predominating idea was that such dramas were not intended for the stage: they were static, pedantic, rhetorical, and altogether too violent.5

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2 Lessing 1836, 51.
3 “Aus welcher Zeit die Tragödien des Seneca nun auch seyn mögen, sie sind über alle Beschreibung schwäulstig und frostig, ohne Natur in Charakter und Handlung, durch die widersinnigsten Unschicklichkeiten empörend, und so von aller theatralischen Einsicht entblößt, daß ich glaube, sie waren nie dazu bestimmt, aus den Schulen der Rhetoren auf die Bühne hervorzutreten.”
4 Schlegel 1846, 210; on Schlegel, and the Senecan reception in Shelley and von Kleist, see Slaney, 2015, from which I draw relevant comparisons.