

Seneca's Drama: Oedipus and Medea

Dr. Alan Haffa

LUCIUS ANNAEUS SENECA (3 B.C.-65 A.D.)

- Cordova, Spain
- Trained as Orator in Rome
- Problems with Caligula
- Exiled by Claudius for allegedly having an affair with emperor's niece
- Brought back by Agrippina as Tutor to Nero
- Influential for 5 years
- Charged in Assassination attempt: Suicide

Stoicism

- Essays and Letters
- Emotions mislead
- Virtue is sufficient for Happiness
- True Freedom possible through moral sufficiency
- Live in accord with Reason and Nature

Tragedies

- 9 Tragedies; all are Latin adaptations of Greek originals
- Closet Dramas: Intended to be read, not performed
- Written during Exile
- Most likely read aloud among elites
- Purpose: to make a moral point of Stoicism

Characteristics of Senecan Tragedy

- Classic themes: Familial Conflict; Conflict between Kings and People
- Long speeches
- Rhetorically stylized: appears artificial
- Memorable Quotes rather than Natural Dialogue
- Explores Philosophical Ideas of Stoicism

Method of Adapting Greeks

- Uses Greek Names and Plot
- Slight Changes in scene arrangement to emphasize a different character or idea
- Uses a Chorus, but no dancing

- The best of the Greek plays ask difficult questions; Seneca's versions attempt to offer an answer.
- Violence and Gore is Depicted (rather than off stage)

Influence

- Translated into English, 1581
- Elizabethan Theater: Shakespeare, Thomas Kyd, Marlowe, Ben Jonson
 - Violence on Stage
 - Unnatural Passions
- French Neo-Classical Theater: Pierre Corneille and Jean Racine
 - Long speeches over Action
 - Rhetorical constructions
 - Artificial Manners and Moralizing
- Baroque Aesthetic in Theater:

Oedipus: Stoics on Fate

- Causal Determinism: Prior events determine outcome of present events
- Fate is not an External, Supernatural Agent acting upon us; it acts through us, through our own Nature
- Can we be held morally culpable for our actions?

Oedipus and his Fate

- While he sought to avoid it, his character also drove him into fulfilling his Fate
- He has a strong-will and wishes to avoid his Fate; thus he leaves Corinth
- He has a quick temper and strikes his father, Laius, killing him
- He is a man of passion and ambition, so he marries the now widowed queen, his real mother.

Oedipus on Fate

- "The fates drive us; to the fates we must yield... All things proceed in the path laid out; our first day appoints our last. Not even God may turn the course of events, which are functions of their causes. For each man the course ordained proceeds to its end, and no prayer can change it. Many find fear itself the evil; they encounter their fate in the act of avoiding it."

Suicide

- In a letter, he wrote: "Mere living is not a good, but living well"; so a wise person "lives as long as he ought, not as long as he can."
- While Stoics would oppose suicide as a weakness in general, in extreme cases of personal misfortune or in response to extreme moral failing, it could be preferable to life, if happiness is no longer attainable.

Jocasta Contemplating Suicide

- "Why so numb, my soul? You are an accomplice in crime: why refuse to share the

punishment?...Die, take sword and banish your accursed spirit...By this blade perished my husband—but why not call him by his true name—my father-in-law. Shall I plunge the weapon into my bosom, or press it deep into my bared throat? But do you not know where the wound belongs? Strike her, my right hand, strike this womb which had room for both husband and son.”

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=udDHV1Sc1N0>

Medea and Revenge

- Stoics viewed Revenge as an Emotion and as something to be controlled and avoided, lest it control and destroy us.
- Seneca explains Medea’s motivation: Extreme revenge against Jason, Creusa, and King Creon, lead her to destroy her own children.
- This plan comes gradually and we see her struggle, but in the end, her hatred of Jason overwhelms her maternal feelings.

Medea lacks self-control: her passion drives her

- Embracing her children, “Here, dear children... You father may have you unharmed, provided your mother, too, may have you. But...any moment they will be torn from my bosom...they are lost to their mother; let them be lost to their father.”
- Unable to keep her children herself, she prefers to destroy them to hurt Jason

Summary

- Style is Rhetorical more than Dramatic
- Long speeches more than Action
- Play demonstrate principles of Stoic philosophy
- Medea shows how destruction follows in the wake of unbridled passions such as Anger and Revenge
- Oedipus demonstrates the inescapability of Fate and Jocasta the appropriateness of suicide in extreme misery
- Seneca’s plays influenced revival of Drama in England and France