

BOOK REVIEW

The Senecan Aesthetic: A Performance History. By HELEN SLANEY. Oxford, U.K.: Oxford University Press, 2016. Pp. xii + 324. Hardcover, \$120.00. ISBN 978-0-19-873676-9.

T*he Senecan Aesthetic*, a revision of the author's 2012 Oxford DPhil thesis, is a welcome addition to the growing body of work on the reception of Senecan tragedy and the plays' performance history. Beginning in sixteenth-century England, this book traces Seneca's rise, fall and (limited) rise by demonstrating how elements from his plays were taken and transformed by dramatists and actors from the early modern period to the contemporary stage.

In the introduction, Slaney defines several themes that determine this aesthetic, two or more of which must be present in order to classify a play as Senecan: "rhetoric, excess, metatheatricality, delirium, possession, abjection, horror, confinement, or *sympatheia*" (3). For Slaney, the defining aspect of the senecan aesthetic is the rhetoric of excess. She notes that Seneca's tragic diction is at its best when expressing psychological and physical pain. Seneca's rhetoric of pain necessarily leads to a disjuncture between the language and the body of the actor on the stage. According to Slaney, this disjuncture, along with changes in aesthetic and dramaturgical ideals that emphasize naturalism and decorum, contributed to the downfall of Seneca in the later seventeenth century and after.

The first three chapters trace Seneca's popularity in sixteenth-century England and France. Seneca was viewed as the master rhetorician of the passions. This view established Seneca as a stylistic model in the early-modern English schoolroom and in contemporary neo-Latin drama. As Seneca was translated into English and was used in the commercial theater, authors sought to build upon Senecan *copia* and surpass their model. Taking examples from the translations collected in the *Tenne Tragedies* of 1581 and plays such as *The Spanish Tragedy*, Slaney argues that the senecan aesthetic soon burned itself out in England. A similar phenomenon took place in France, as seen in the plays of Étienne Jodelle and Jean de La Péruse.

After this period comes the suppression and censorship of Seneca (Chapters 4–6). Yet as Slaney demonstrates, the senecan aesthetic could not be fully suppressed despite the fact that it runs counter to Aristotelian ideals of mimetic

theater, which replaced the earlier focus on rhetoric and the display of the passions. Even when authors reject Seneca, as Jean Racine does in his preface to *Phèdre*, elements of the senecan aesthetic still remain present. In England, the Senecan aesthetic at times survived more openly, particularly in the plays of Nathaniel Lee.

The final two chapters consider Shelley's *The Cenci* and its adaptation by Antonin Artaud. Slaney outlines the central influence Seneca had on Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty, as well as how this revaluation of Seneca influenced playwrights in the 1960s. This chapter concludes with a critique of Otto Zwierlein's famous declaration that Seneca's plays are "recitation dramas." As Slaney notes, this argument unfairly condemns Seneca's plays by subscribing to non-Senecan ideals of naturalism (262-5).

In the conclusion, Slaney treats some of the more recent adaptations of Seneca, such as Caryl Churchill's *Thyestes*. She argues that despite the recent resurgence of interest in Seneca's plays in scholarship and on the stage, there is "a paradox that Senecan theatre no longer has to be senecan" (276). Slaney argues that this paradox lies in the domestication of speech by modern playwrights. By using Seneca to show how anesthetized we have become to violence and evil in the modern West, playwrights have flattened out the rhetorically charged nature of Seneca's tragic diction.

Despite the overall strengths of this book, I did come away with a few questions and reservations, two of which I shall discuss briefly below. Why not include Stoicism as one of the elements of the senecan aesthetic? In the early modern period, the conflict between Stoicism and revenge is acute in several of the plays discussed by Slaney. To take a contemporary example, Sarah Kane's *Phaedra's Love* gives Stoic *apatheia* a new twist by presenting a bored and emotionless Hippolytus. *Sympatheia* might initially seem to lend an element of Stoicism to Slaney's criteria, yet for her this term does not refer to the Stoic theory of universal moral and physical interaction. *Sympatheia* designates the links between actor and stage environment (38).

One of the neo-Latin texts discussed in chapter one is James Calfhill's *Progne*, performed for the Queen's visit to Oxford in 1566. Unfortunately, no version of this text survives, but Slaney notes that this play was likely modelled on Gregorio Corraro's *Progne*, which was "printed in 1558" (57). This point is misleading as Corraro (also known as Correr) likely composed this play in the late 1420s. Indeed, by starting the analysis of the senecan aesthetic in sixteenth-century England, Slaney overlooks earlier neo-Latin dramas. The revival began centuries

earlier in Italy with Albertino Mussato's *Ecerinis* of 1314. With Mussato's play we may find the origins of the senecan aesthetic as well as its performance history. This tragedy was so successful that a decree was passed stating that the play should be read in the town hall of Padua each Christmas.¹

Overall, however, Slaney provides an excellent history of the reception of Senecan drama since the early modern period. She is particularly sensitive to how complex this history is, especially during periods when Seneca was officially out of favor. Slaney concludes on a provocative note, and denies that Senecan drama is as relevant to the modern world as some have argued. Rather, it provides a prophetic warning for what may lie in the future.

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¹G. Grund. 2011. *Humanist Tragedies*. Cambridge, MA. xxi.