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Senecan Tragedy as Response to Stoic Critique

ROBIN LEAH WEISS
American University in Cairo

Abstract

Seneca changes the conflict at the center of tragedy so that the protagonist is no longer caught between internal causes and external causes, the latter of which threaten to overpower or undermine the former. By employing various strategies for deemphasizing external causes, he is able to reframe tragedy around a conflict internal to the subject. Doing so allows him to solve two of the most significant problems the Stoics had identified with poetry, (i) that of the audience's identification with protagonists and (ii) the conflation of virtues and vices. By these means, Seneca is able to produce a drama that agrees more with Stoic sensibilities, or at least, does not too overtly offend them.

Keywords: Seneca; tragedy; Thyestes; Agamemnon; Stoicism; poetry

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ROBIN LEAH WEISS
American University in Cairo

Is there any connection between Seneca the dramatist and Seneca the writer of Stoicizing prose? Seneca's readers generally fall into two categories: there are those who look for some connection between his Stoicism and his drama and those who reject the very notion that Seneca's philosophical Stoicism has any bearing on his career as a dramatist. The latter group find it difficult to believe that Seneca could have seen the tragedies he authored as serving any moral purpose (Dingel, 1974; Segal, 1986; Bartsch, 1994; Boyle, 1997; Schiesaro, 2003).[1] They tend to view Seneca the writer of moralizing prose and Seneca the tragic poet as two different and unconnected sides of the author's personality.

In the opposing camp, some scholars have found in Seneca's tragedies connections, large and small, to his Stoicism,[2] for example, in the way his decidedly Stoic way of conceptualizing the cosmos appears in the plays (Rosenmeyer, 1989), or in the way that different characters are sometimes depicted as representing divergent moral viewpoints, one of which is often Stoic (Lefevere, 1985). Some have found a connection to Seneca's Stoicism in the play's technically precise depiction of the emotions (Nussbaum, 1993; Gill, 1997; Staley, 2010).[3] Others meanwhile, even those generally hostile to the suggestion that Seneca uses his plays to impart a moral lesson, argue that Seneca uses various literary devices to help his audience take a critical distance from and reflect upon the passions depicted onstage (Nussbaum, 1993, p. 137; Schiesaro, 2003,

1 For an overview of the difficulties scholars face in connecting Seneca's tragedy and his philosophical prose, see Armisen-Marchetti (1989, pp. 347-365).

2 For a summary of attempts dating back a century to connect the plays and prose works, see Pratt (1983, pp. 73-81).

3 Of contemporary scholars, Staley makes perhaps the strongest case that, although Seneca does not view his plays as a form of moral education, or use his plays to teach a didactic "moral lesson" *per se*, he does use them to depict human nature at its worst, and thus to help his audience reflect on the cognitive processes that underly humans' most violent passions (2010, pp. 52-64).

pp. 235-244). Are there however any additional points of contact between Seneca's Stoicism and his tragedies—any that might even point to the existence of a more direct connection than recent scholarship has suggested?

Like Martha Nussbaum, I regard it as essential that we first understand the reasons why Stoics in general would have assumed that poetry and philosophy were like oil and water since, *were* Seneca to have attempted to combine the two, he must at least have done so with the clear intent to meet the challenges involved, or at least with a clear awareness of the challenges (such as for example the need to sacrifice the integrity of one element to accommodate the other). Like Nussbaum, I will therefore try to address the problem of the connection between Seneca's plays and his Stoicism, by first considering some of the reasons for the existence of a conflict between Stoic philosophy and poetry. I go beyond Nussbaum, however, in attempting to probe some of the deeper reasons for an incompatibility between Stoic philosophy and tragic poetry in particular. I will then attempt to discover whether we can find in Seneca's plays any signs that he attempted to overcome the conflict by changing his tragedies to make them more compatible, or at least less incompatible, with Stoic philosophy. My claim is that we do find such signs. Specifically, my claim is that, in its classical form, tragedy centers around a certain type of conflict between the individual and the world that makes tragedy a particularly problematic form of poetry from the Stoic point of view. When we turn to Seneca's plays, we find evidence that he attempts to mitigate this and a related set of problems.

1 Problems With Tragedy

Which aspects of poetry in general, and tragedy in specific, not only make it a poor vehicle for Stoicism, but give it the potential to undermine Stoicism? Here, I am sympathetic to arguments to the effect that tragedy, as a poetic form, is inherently antithetical to Stoic ends, although I reject the further conclusion that Seneca could therefore only have used tragedy for non-Stoic, or anti-Stoic ends. I merely argue Seneca could

not have accepted tragedy *unaltered* in it the form in which he received it, and must therefore have reformed tragedy to make it compatible with, or at least not directly hostile to Stoic ends.

I shall argue that there are three aspects of tragedy in particular, which seem to be both *inherent to tragedy as a poetic form* and *in conflict with Stoicism*. The first two apply to poetry in general and have already been identified by Nussbaum (1993, pp. 123-131). I shall however focus on their application to tragic poetry in specific. The third applies to tragedy in particular and is not mentioned by Nussbaum. Altogether, the three reasons are:

1. the identification of the audience with the actions and affections of a morally flawed protagonist
2. the conflation of virtue and vice in the person of the protagonist
3. the presentation of a conflict between inner and outer forces

To begin with the first, tragedy is essentially focused on portraying characters with whose strong emotions an audience can identify. But since tragedy, by its very nature, presents morally *flawed* characters—albeit ones who are good enough to attract the audience's sympathetic identification—the audience invariably ends up identifying with the perspective and passions of a morally flawed individual such as Medea or Atreus. To this end, a tragedian will even render a morally flawed character in precisely such a manner as to attract the audience's sympathetic identification. Not only this, but the character is rendered so that the audience identifies with the character precisely in virtue of the morally flawed actions and affections with which the play is concerned, actions and affections that are constituted, in specific, by the overappraisal of some externals things and the excessive fear of others (Nussbaum 1993, pp. 123-125).[4] Seneca himself, repeating a refrain already found in the *Republic*,[5] complains that poets depict characters this way,

4 Nussbaum's reconstruction relies on Plutarch's *How to Study Poetry*. This text repeats several criticisms of poetry also found in Seneca (*Brev. Vit*. 16.5, 26.6, Ep. 115.12, cited in the notes below), before adding, with explicit reference to tragedy, that poetry encourages audiences to identify with characters in respect of their fear of external things such as death, so that they are "infected by their passion" (17c-d). Nussbaum argues that the view Plutarch espouses is Stoic. This can be seen when Plutarch's text is read in conjunction with the aforementioned passages in Seneca, as well as some in Strabo (I.2.3).

5 In Books II-III we find Socrates complaining that Achilles is portrayed as attaching significance

and thus encourage the audience to evaluate external things in the same manner as their characters.[6]

A second criticism Stoics make of poetry in general concerns the way in which it presents characters in whom virtue and vice coexist alongside one another. Plutarch writes as follows:

> "The imitation that does not completely disregard the truth brings along with it (*sunkepherei*) signs of both vice and virtue that have been mixed in the actions (*kakias kai aretēs semeia memeigmena tais praxesin*), as in the case of Homer, who emphatically says goodbye to the Stoics, who judge that nothing base can attach to virtue, nor anything good to vice (*mēte ti phaulon aretēi proseinai mēte kakiai xrēston axiousin*), but, in all ways, the ignorant person errs in everything, and in turn man of culture is right in everything (*panta d' au katorthoun ton asteion*)."
>
> (*Quomodo adul.* 25b8-25c4)

If Plutarch is any guide, the Stoics may have feared that unsuspecting listeners could end up imitating Achilles' vices as well as his virtues, especially if they were to follow the twists and turns in the plot of the *Iliad* as Achilles switches back and forth from acting virtuously, to acting viciously, to acting virtuously again (26b9-e1).[7] Likewise, Stoics may have objected to the depiction of generally vicious people as having some virtues and sometimes acting in virtuous ways, since this could blind audiences to the vices lurking underneath an apparently virtuous exterior.[8] All epic and dramatic poetry should have this prob-

to Patroclus' death in a way that a truly virtuous person would not (386d9-387a2). These false beliefs (*doxai*) about externals are then internalized by the audience and "taken into the soul" (377b7). See further Nussbaum (1993, pp. 104-106).

6 For example, he complains that stories about Jupiter's indiscretions lead people to believe that immoderate desire is normal, even good. Stories of the underworld and the fear it inspires encourage the audience to fear death (*Brev. Vit.* 16.5, 26.6).

7 Plutarch thinks this danger can be averted if young audiences are warned from an early age that, as in poetry so in life, everyone has their virtues and their vices (26a1-b5). The Stoics may have agreed with Plutarch that audiences should be taught to sharply distinguish between Achilles' virtuous and vicious deeds, although, presumably, they must have insisted on the unity of virtue as a point of doctrine, and rejected the idea that *true* virtue can ever be accompanied by vice.

8 Plutarch mentions that it is a feature of tragedies, in particular, that they take vicious characters,

lem of course since narrating the actions of a perfectly good person would lack interest for audiences (25d2-e1), as Plato already observed.[9] But given that tragedy is usually thought to require a noble but flawed hero, the combination of virtue and vice in single person seems especially essential to the tragic form, and hence, this problem seems endemic to tragedy in particular.

The Stoics seem to have found nothing to criticize in poetry depicting vice *per se*, as long as it presented vicious characters acting in vicious ways and then suffering the consequences, for example, overvaluing externals and then undergoing *pathē*. Epictetus even praises the potential pedagogical value of tragedy for this reason.[10] So the Stoics' complaint about drama, if they had one, was not simply that it put vice onstage. Rather, their complaint about drama was that many plays presented neither virtue *nor* vice—but a confused combination of the two.

It becomes even clearer why this problem would have applied to tragedy in particular if we consider the virtue Stoics insisted most emphatically was incompatible with vice. I am speaking of course of the quality of *constantia*, which the Stoics said belonged only to the virtuous person, the vicious person having no part in it.[11] *Constantia*, 'constancy' or 'consistency,' is the ability to single-mindedly pursue one's ends without wavering or retreating, especially under variable circumstances. Incidentally, *constantia* and its opposite, *inconstantia*, happen to be the

such as Phaedra, in the *Hippolytus*, and place beautiful speeches in their mouths so that "plausible and artful words are framed to accompany disreputable and knavish actions" (28a1).

9 As Nussbaum points out, this criticism of poetry can also be traced back to the *Republic*. There, Socrates bemoans the way in which poetry takes heroes and gods, who are supposed to be virtuous, and presents them as behaving in vicious ways, for example, lacking self-sufficiency and over-esteeming external goods in ways that produce passions (1993, p. 125).

10 Epictetus is almost certainly following Chrysippus when he points out that tragedies show how vicious people are made to suffer because of their attachment to external things. He asks, "but what ese are tragedies but the suffering of people who have been wonderstruck by external things, displayed in the usual metre" (*Dis*. I.4.30)?

11 "The worthless man, however…does everything badly…easily changing his mind and in the grip of regret over every matter (*eumetaptôs ôn kai par' ekasta metameleiai sunechomenos*: Stob. *Ecl*. 11i15, 1999, 79, cf. 11m5, 11m19). The same is implicit in the Stoic definition of virtue as "a disposition and faculty of the governing principle of the soul, brought into being by reason, or rather, reason itself consistent, firm, and unwavering (*homologoumenon kai bebaion kai ametaptôn to hupotithentai*: *Vir Mor*. 441c: *L.S.* 61B, trans. Long and Sedley). For similar definitions of virtue, see: Stob. *Ecl*. 5b1; *De Fin*. V.xxiii.66.

virtues and vices that figure most prominently in tragedy. For one thing, tragedy seems to demand a peculiar combination of *constantia* and *inconstantia* because it seems to have to present characters, on the one hand, as undergoing a change in the face of unexpected events, and thus as *inconstant*, but also, at the same time, as proceeding with a certain determination down a path that eventually leads to misfortune, and thus as *constant*. It must even present characters as *constant* to a fault. Indeed, one is struck by the way in which, in classical tragedy, *constantia*, or something like it, appears almost as *the* tragic flaw par excellence, since, it is the tragic hero's hubristic insistence on a certain course of action that exacerbates his or her other failings and provides an occasion for his or her downfall. The playwright typically underlines this aspect of the drama by showing the protagonist continuing down a collision course with disaster, despite being given various opportunities (in the form of bad omens and warnings) to slow down or change course. Of course, this fact makes it appear that tragedy must necessarily portray *constantia*, if not as itself a vice,[12] then at least as coexisting alongside, and compatible with vices. In short, the Stoics may have thought tragedy mixed virtue and vice by presenting a virtue like *constantia* as compatible with vice and its effects—things which, on a Stoic account, it excludes.

We have now detailed the first two problems with tragedy. In the section to follow I address the third problem with tragedy, which I shall subsequently argue is the underlying cause of the other two.

2 Tragic Conflict

The third problem with tragedy is not explicitly mentioned by Nussbaum and is only referred to obliquely in surviving sources, perhaps because, more than the others, it is particular to tragedy as opposed

12 Plutarch, in *How to Study Poetry*, complains at length that poets mislead their listeners by employing words in a way that is incompatible with the strict philosophic sense of these terms. He singles out 'virtue' and 'happiness' as words that are particularly subject to abuse. Assuming he follows the Stoics here, they may have complained that, in poetry, characters are often presented as having "virtue" when, in the strict Stoic sense of the term, they are not virtuous (24c9-d2).

to other poetic forms.[13] Nevertheless, I will argue that, whether it was explicitly named by early Stoics or not, it would have appeared to any Stoic who considered the issue, not only as a significant problem in its own right, but as the root cause underlying the other two problems.

This third problem with tragedy has to do with the way this poetic form, in particular, is defined by a conflict between two opposing forces. Call this the problem of 'tragic conflict.' For expedience's sake, we can reduce this conflict to the opposition between a set of internal motivations that drive the individual *from within* and a set of external forces that compel the individual *from without*: the internal and external sources of action. However, this distinction also embraces a wider set of related oppositions, which Jean-Pierre Vernant variously identifies as including those between personal agency and external necessity, reason and compulsion, individual and cosmos, the human and the divine (1988b, p. 43). For example, in Sophocles' *Oedipus*, Oedipus' repeated attempts to assert himself as a rational individual come into direct conflict with a series of fated events beyond his power to control.

In Euripides' *Medea*, to take another example, the clash between Medea's love for Jason, which is central to who she is as a person, on the one hand, and the event of his betrayal, on the other, produces the reaction in Medea that moves the dramatic action forward and sets in motion the series of events that lead to catastrophe. This conflict is essential to provoking the reaction of fear and pity that defines tragedy. Martha Nussbaum describes this nicely in explaining the audience's response to *Medea*:

> The ordinary spectator of Medea's tragedy would find something deeply painful in the way in which great and loyal love,

13 However, in Plutarch, we do find a persistent concern that poetry characterizes the gods as malevolent objects of fear, who are opposed to human purposes (16d1). Moreover, Epictetus does say that tragedy should be read, not in order to reinforce an existing tendency on our part to see ourselves as unhappy victims of fate, but instead, with the opposite end in view: to reconcile ourselves to fate. One should read poetry with the aim "to remove from his own life mournings and lamentations, and such expressions as 'omoi' and 'talas egō,' and misfortune and ill fortune, and to learn the meaning of death, exile, prison, hemlock—so he can say in prison, O dear Crito, if this is what pleases the gods, so be it…" (*Dis*. I.4.23).

> betrayed, leads on to disaster; for they would think of such a love as a fine thing, and it would seem horrible that the interaction between love and the world would produce such a morally disturbing result. (1993, p. 143)

As in most poetry, the main character is caught between these two forces, one internal and one external. However, in tragedy, the clash between the two produces horrifying results. Pity and fear are thus aroused in the spectator precisely because the spectator is made aware of the possibility that they may so clash.

The example of *Medea* is invoked here, not because the play should be taken as a paradigmatic example of classical tragedy, but rather because it shows how even a fairly unconventional tragedy such as *Medea* can still be viewed as roughly adhering to this general model. At first sight of course, Medea appears to violate this pattern, since the murder of her children seems to be the result of a freely chosen, even gratuitous decision on her part. Yet Euripides takes care to emphasize that Medea's actions are motivated by her sense of justice in response to a betrayal (26, 160, 165, 578, 580, 582, 1352-53). In several scholars' opinion, she, like many tragic heroes, is constrained by a code of honor to avenge this betrayal, even when revenge comes at a significant personal cost, and indeed, even when it conflicts directly with her deeply felt wishes and intentions (Bongie 1977, pp. 29-32; Dihle, 1977, pp. 24-16; Foley, 1989, pp. 65-66). Hence, it is not impossible to interpret Medea as driven to revenge by external forces that also overcome the opposed internal forces within her (whether these internal forces are identified with her motherly instincts or her rationality).

Of course, if it were felt that this sort of conflict between internal and external forces could be avoided, or that external forces could be brought under the individual's control, tragedy would lack something of its tragic quality. What must give tragedy its distinctly "tragic" quality then, must be the tragic drama's depiction of an external force as both (*i*.) exceeding the power of the individual to fully control and (*ii*.) ultimately winning out over the inner force, or forces, to which it is

opposed. To use Vernant's example, in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* for instance, Agamemnon's better judgment, not to mention his fatherly affections, are overcome by forces that are larger than himself, such as fate, the gods, and the larger sweep of events that have brought him to the present juncture (1988a, pp. 71-77). Here, the protagonist's partial or complete ignorance of the way in which he or she is moved by external forces—Sophocles' *Oedipus* is the most obvious example—only further strengthens the impression that he or she is driven by external forces that exceed the ability of the human individual to comprehend, much less control. And this explains why it is also a common—but by no means necessary—feature of tragedy that the protagonist sometimes discovers only too late that he or she has fallen victim to external forces (1988b, p. 45).

Against this admittedly sweeping characterization of tragedy, it might be argued—and this point will later prove important for an assessment of how greatly Senecan tragedy differs from the classical version—that the protagonist is only temporarily caught between internal and external forces, and that, in many cases, these two forces eventually combine to determine which course of action the protagonist eventually takes. This is because, as Vernant points out, the protagonist is never pushed in one direction without the opposing force becoming an accomplice to the act. For example, Agamemnon eventually decides to sacrifice his daughter not simply because he is fated by external events to do so, but also because his own military ambitions and human vanity conspire with larger forces to push him in that direction (1988a, pp. 72-73). Hence the theory of "double motivation," which claims that tragic action is determined simultaneously by two causes, an internal and external cause (Lesky, 1966).[14] Nonetheless, although the tragic hero is never a completely innocent victim of external forces, it remains true that these external forces must prove decisive in such a way that one can at least imagine a future scenario in which the protagonist looks back on his or her actions and doubts whether he or she would have acted the in same way were it not for the influence of external forces.

14 Foley argues for example that the audience cannot help but see reflected in Medea's words, "the overdetermination of Medea's thoughts, emotions, and actions" (1989, p.72).

Why would this feature of tragedy have elicited Stoic criticism? Simply put, because tragedy implies that (*a*.) the individual should fear external forces because they are in fundamental conflict with the individual's deepest, and most sincerely felt aims and intentions, and that (*b*.) such a "clash" is one the individual has no power to avoid.

Although the matter cannot be discussed at length here, it should be noted that the worldview presented in tragedy is in fundamental conflict with the Stoics' own. In the Stoics' view, the ordinary state of affairs is one in which internal and external sources of action *cooperate* to produce the same result. In the Stoic view, for example, once a person receives a sufficiently clear and strong external impression from the world and assents to it, this in combination with the individual's inner nature should result in an impulse to act.[15] The result is that the same action is proscribed by *both* external *and* internal causes. Here, there is no conflict between internal and external to speak of.[16] Indeed, there is a serious question whether tragedy is even *intelligible* from a Stoic point of view. If as Vernant stresses, tragedy's existence presupposes the ability to distinguish between internal and external as distinct and opposed forces (1988b, pp. 46-47, 1988a, pp. 81-82), and if the Stoics were not even able to treat external and internal as distinct forces capable of independent causal operation, then a serious question arises as to whether they were capable of conceiving a conflict between internal and external, much less of conceiving external forces as hostile or overpowering.

The Stoics *were* capable of course, of recognizing the existence of a certain kind of conflict between the individual and the world, but in their view, such a conflict was always caused *by the individual*. This was what they termed a *pathos*. A *pathos* occurred because of precipitous assent to an unclear impression, and resulted in a violent emotional reaction, on the part of the individual, to an external state of affairs.[17]

15 On the one hand, the object that gives rise to a *katalêptic* impression acts upon the subject as a necessary cause, causing, even "compelling," the subject to assent to the impression (Sextus, *Math*. 7.257, cf. *Math*. 7.252; *Acad*. II.xxi.38, *Acad*. II.xxiv.77, II.vi.18, II.xxi.38). On the other hand, the individual's action is determined by his or her human nature (Alex. *Fat*. 189.20-2; 182.32-183.2).

16 Nor, as several scholars have pointed out, is there a conflict between rational autonomy and external compulsion, for which reason the Stoics' position has been labeled compatibilist (Salles, 2005, pp. 61-63; Bobzien, 1998, p. 387-394).

17 Galen, *P.H.P* 4.3.2-5: *L.S.* 64K.

It could never be blamed on a hostile external power. Hence the problem with tragedy, from the Stoics' point of view, would have been that it presented conflicts between the individual and the world as beyond one's power to prevent, therefore as uncontrollable events to be feared.

We have just outlined some of the problems that Seneca would possibly have confronted if he were to write tragedies as a Stoic. He may have reasoned to all these conclusions on his own or, more likely, encountered some in written form in Stoic texts.[18] Whatever the case, we can see that scholars who doubt Seneca the playwright has any connection to Seneca the moralist have some justification for supposing that Seneca must have realized that tragedy and Stoicism were incompatible and put aside his Stoicism to write his tragedies. This is all the more plausible when Seneca's own plays seem designed to permit the audience to revel in the base passions of his protagonists, the bloodshed and gore to which they lead—to no apparent moral end. The villain goes unpunished; the victim cries out for retribution in vain. What possible connection, one might ask, could these plays have with Stoicism?

In what follows, I will argue that it is not necessary to take the simple position that Seneca's Stoicism is either compatible or incompatible with tragedy, that his tragedies do or do not reflect his Stoicism. Beyond this simple dichotomy, a third alternative is possible: Seneca transforms tragedy to better accommodate Stoicism while retaining what is essential to tragedy insofar as is possible.

3 Tragedy Transformed

18 The chances that Seneca read Stoic critiques of poetry are high, given the sheer number of texts by Stoics on the subject: Diogenes Laertius lists, among others, Zeno's *Peri Poiētikēs Akroseōs* (Diog. VII.4), Cleanthes' *Peri Tou Poiētou* (VII.173), and Chrysippus' *Peri Poiēmatōn* and *Peri Tou Pōs Dei Poiēmaton Akouein* (VII.200). Unfortunately, however, we find no explicit evidence in Seneca's prose works that he was aware of any specifically Stoic criticisms of poetry, although we do find evidence that he was broadly aware of Platonic criticisms of poetry (Staley, 2010, p. 7). Nussbaum has argued that these Platonic criticisms were formative for the Stoics (Nussbaum, 1993, pp. 104-106, see above). Seneca was aware, for example, of the idea that art was mimesis, an imitatio naturae (Ep. 65.3, 8). He also knew that tragic verses could stir the wrong passions (Ep. 115.12.14). As Staley has argued, Seneca would have been keenly aware of the ancient quarrel between philosophy and poetry and would not have written tragedies "without at least addressing in his own mind this 'ancient quarrel'" (Staley, 2101, p. 14).

Since Martha Nussbaum has already shown how Seneca's Stoic predecessors, faced with poetry they saw as having disadvantages, generally proposed adopting a reformed poetry that retained the advantages of poetry without the disadvantages, it is reasonable to suppose that Seneca adopted a similar strategy (1993, p. 141).

Unfortunately, there is less scholarly consensus about precisely *how* Stoics, including Seneca, proposed to reform poetry. Here I diverge from Nussbaum. Nussbaum suggests that the simplest means the Stoics would have had of eliminating the audience's identification with the protagonist—she focuses almost exclusively on this problem—would have simply been to make the protagonist morally repugnant; she argues that it is for this reason that Seneca makes his characters as off-putting as possible (1993, p. 148, *contra* Schiesaro 2003, p. 244).[19] Nussbaum's conjecture has proved influential for interpretations that stress the many ways in which Seneca purportedly constructs his plays to promote disinterested reflection and "critical spectatorship" (Schiesaro 2004, p. 244).[20] However, despite its attraction, this sort of interpretation finds little textual support in surviving texts like Plutarch's *How to Study Poetry*, which rather instruct *audience members* how to keep their guard up against poetry and its inevitably anti-philosophic content, not *the poet* how to defang poetry in order to protect the audience from its baleful influence. Taken by itself, it also has the drawback of focusing almost exclusively on the problem of identification, as it presumes Seneca only attempted to solve *this* problem, and what's more, did so only in a relatively superficial manner, neglecting the possibility that he attempted to address this problem by addressing a deeper structural problem within the tragic form.

However, now that we have a better understanding of the problems with tragedy, which explain why tragedy and philosophy are difficult to com-

19 Nussbaum seems to think the Stoics adopted a suggestion from Plato's *Republic*: putting speeches that contain false beliefs in the mouths of lowly or risible characters, or women (387e9-388a1; 1993, p. 107). Schiesaro by contrast is not persuaded that we are meant to be repelled by Medea and Atreus (2003, p. 244).

20 Both Schiesaro and Nussbaum find it useful to compare Seneca with Brecht in this respect (2003, pp. 243-251). Schiesaro however is more hesitant about concluding on this basis that Seneca's plays have a moral purpose (2003, p. 62, p. 259).

bine, we can see *how* Seneca may have confronted these challenges. I shall begin by showing how Seneca addresses the larger problem of tragic conflict, which has been relatively ignored in existing scholarship, in order to show how, by resolving this, the third problem I have discussed above, he resolves the other two problems. I will therefore focus, first, on this problem, which I will argue, is the larger of the three and underlies the other two, and then suggest some ways in which, having solved this problem, Seneca solved the other two. Broadly, my argument shall be that, by removing external necessitating causes for the protagonist's action, Seneca eliminates the conflict between inner and outer forces at the heart of the tragic form. In general, I will proceed by examining Seneca's *Thyestes*, after which I will attempt to draw some conclusions that may be extended to Seneca's plays more broadly.

4 Thyestes

At first glance, the *Thyestes* could be mistaken for a typical tragedy in classical style and Thyestes a typical protagonist.[21] Like any tragic hero, Thyestes has a tragic flaw and bears no small part of the responsibility for his downfall. However, I shall argue that in Thyestes' case, this tragic flaw bears the bulk of the responsibility for his downfall and external causes almost none.

Thyestes' tragic flaw is of course his lust for power, which has already driven him to seduce his brother's wife and, together with her, plot to unseat his brother, Atreus, from the throne. This immoderate lust for power now provides Atreus a pretext for punishing Thyestes (220-241). First, we hear from Atreus how Thyestes' lust for power has brought them to the current pass and made the use of extreme force necessary:

> And what could be cruel enough to vanquish him? Does he lie

21 *Contra* Schiesaro, I shall argue that Thyestes is the main protagonist. Schiesaro argues that "we do not fear with Thyestes but plot with Atreus." Much of Schiesaro's interpretation however relies on the claim that Atreus' viewpoint and machinations are foregrounded for the audience when the same could equally be said of Thyestes' (2003, p. 3). Nonetheless, my interpretation does not exclude that Atreus is also a protagonist, or that the play has two tragic figures.

> downcast? Can he abide moderation in success, or inaction in failure? (*numquid secundis patitur in rebus modum, fessis quietum?*) I know the man's intractable nature: he cannot be bent, but he can be broken. So, before he strengthens himself or marshals his powers, he must be attacked first, lest he attack me at rest. (196-203)[22]

According to Atreus, Thyestes has already proved himself to be a dangerous threat who must be met by preemptive force so that Thyestes already bears a significant share of the responsibility for the punishment he is about to receive. Second, Thyestes bears a large share of the responsibility for what he is about to suffer insofar as his immoderate lust for power becomes the means by which he is led into danger. This character flaw is harnessed by Atreus in the service of his revenge plot when he tricks Thyestes into returning to the palace at Argos, luring him into his trap (*laqueus*: 287) with the false promise that, once he has returned, the two brothers will share the throne together (290-294). Here, Atreus accurately predicts that Thyestes will do anything, including risk his own life, to satisfy his desire for power:

> But as it is, he desires my kingdom. In this desire (*hac spe*) he will confront Jove's threat of thunderbolt; in this desire (*hac spe*) he will face the threats of swelling flood, or enter the treacherous straits of the Libyan Syrtes; in this desire (*hac spe*) he will do what he thinks the greatest evil: see his brother. (290-294).

Hence, to the question of which weapon he will choose to attack Thyestes, he replies "Thyestes himself" (*Ipso Thyeste*: 258). In short, like all tragic figures, Thyestes' flaws make him vulnerable and induce him to take steps that will lead to his own downfall. But, in addition, Thyestes seems more responsible than most tragic heroes for creating the very circumstances under which he is tempted to make a fatal mistake.

Thyestes is, like many tragic figures, pulled in two directions at once and forced to make a choice: Thyestes must choose either to retreat to

22 Unless otherwise noted, all translations are taken from Fitch, 2004.

the safety and obscurity of the countryside to live out his days in peace with his children by his side or to return to Argos and claim the throne at significant risk to himself and to them (404-470). But is this a classic conflict between inner and outer forces? We might say that Thyestes' desire for power, which exerts and inexorable pull on him, is in conflict with his heartfelt intention to live the quiet life and, straining a bit, that, while the latter is internal to Thyestes as an individual, the former is provoked by external causes. However, although tempting, Atreus' offer does not really exert any outside pressure on Thyestes to which he is not already subject, such that he can be said to act under the compulsion of an external force. So we might instead say that the conflict is better construed as one between two *internal* forces: Thyestes' desire for the quiet life and his desire for power. Indeed, I shall argue this is probably the better interpretation.

Thyestes of course chooses to return and claim power. But unlike in classical tragedy, the decision Thyestes makes is not presented in such a way as to appear determined by external forces. It is not simply that Thyestes' lust for power makes him susceptible to larger forces: external causes such as Atreus' offer play a comparatively minor role and Thyestes' lust for power is instead presented as *the* force that bears primary responsibility. At first, it may seem to differ only slightly whether we say Thyestes is primarily impelled by lust for power or primarily compelled by external forces, to which his ambitions make him susceptible, but as Seneca is aware, the implications of leaning toward one interpretation or the other are significant, as will be explained further below.

The fact that we are meant to interpret Thyestes' actions in the former way is indicated by the striking absence of any reference to exculpating external causes for Thyestes' behavior. (Hence mine is an argument from silence.) But it is also foreshadowed by a long choral ode that informs us in advance that the bloody spectacle we are about to witness could have been avoided were it not for Thyestes' desire for power. It announces that, if kings' hearts were free of desire, hostilities would cease and there would be "no need of calvary, no need of weapons…

no need to flatten cities" (381-387). The audience's impression that it is Thyestes' desire that leads him onward and that is responsible for what is about to happen is reinforced when the next scene opens on Thyestes walking toward Argos as he daydreams about returning home to adoring crowds (409-411).

It could be argued of course that Thyestes is pressed in this direction by his son's entreaties (429-433), since he himself claims to act on his children's urging (*ego vos sequor, non duco*: 489). But this interpretation must be excluded because Thyestes' son only offers him gentle reassurances that he can trust Atreus, which importantly, Thyestes knows better than to believe (*errat hic aliquis dolus*: 473-486). Ultimately, we must reason by process of elimination that it is Thyestes' lust for power that leads him to suppress his doubts, overlook the evident dangers that await him, and press ahead.

Notably, Thyestes does not describe himself, nor is he described by others as being swept along by the course of events as he proceeds towards Argos, as we would expect if we were intended to view Thyestes as a victim of circumstance. On the contrary, Thyestes actually describes himself as swimming *against* the current:

> My intention is to proceed, but my body is weak-kneed and faltering, and I am pulled away from the goal I struggle towards. Just so a ship urged on by oar and sail, is carried back by the tide resisting oar and sail (*sic concitatam remige et velo ratem, aestus resistens remigi et velo refert*: 436-439)

It cannot be understated how dramatically this passage contrasts with the way a typical tragic hero such as Agamemnon is described as blown *with* the wind, or in one translation, as "blowing together with the blast of fortune" (*tuchaisi sumpneon*: 187). It signals that Thyestes is not to be understood as powerlessly swept along by stronger forces but, if anything, as opposing *them*. It is also significant that Thyestes goes *slowly* and *reluctantly* to his doom (*moveo nolentem gradum*: 418-420). This contrasts markedly with the way in which the great figures of classical

tragedy race hastily down a given path (Kirkland, 2014). It again shows that his actions are undertaken in apparent defiance of opposing forces; they are in no way *overdetermined* by external and internal forces, the combined force of which usually send a protagonist rushing down the path to certain doom.[23]

In general, Seneca eliminates the possibility of seeing Thyestes' actions as determined any number of external causes: Atreus' false promises are not particularly persuasive to him (418-420), nor, although Atreus' actions are arguably undertaken under the influence of supernatural forces (1-121),[24] is there any indication that Thyestes *himself* is subject to them. Nor is Thyestes spurred by the fear of poverty; in fact, the safety and security of the simple life appeals to him (445-470). Indeed, the causal factors that explain Thyestes' actions are so few that one must conclude that, not only are his actions *not* over-determined, but in fact, he takes a path *opposite* to the one he seems more than sufficiently necessitated by external causes to take.

What we have here then is an apparently a classic tragic scenario in which, at a crossroads, the protagonist takes a course of action that turns out to be the wrong one and that he will later come to regret. For

23 Unfortunately, it is impossible to know how significant Seneca's innovation is, or how greatly his version differed from other staged adaptations of the Atreus myth. We know of eight Greek tragedians and six Roman ones who adapted the myth for the stage. But besides Seneca's *Thyestes*, the only one that survives in partial form is Accius' *Atreus* (Tarrant, 1985, pp. 40-43).

24 For reasons of length, I do not address Atreus' role in the tragedy here. It should be noted however, that Atreus' apparent subjection to the Furies could make him a more traditional tragic figure (on the role of the prologue and the Fury's appearance there, see below). Nonetheless, even this interpretation should probably be resisted in favor of an interpretation that would make Atreus similar to Thyestes, as I have described him here. On this reading, the two brothers can be understood as mirror images of one another: First, Atreus, like Thyestes, is in control of himself the entire time. Second, he ignores his own misgivings about what he is about to do, especially in two instances in which he chides his spirit not to retreat (283, 324). Third, so far from arising from the forces of nature or the gods' influence, Atreus' actions are emphatically and repeatedly described as contrary to the natural order and repellant to the gods (260-266, 703, 790-884). In this case as well, human arrogance is not just accomplice to a deed instigated by external or divine forces, as in most tragedies, but the driving force that impels the protagonist to act in defiance of the gods. Note that Atreus wants his power to rival the gods (713, 911, 885-888). In general, Seneca not only minimizes reference to any instigating cause that might exculpate Atreus, but repeatedly emphasizes that his actions go far beyond what antecedent causes might explain: they are unnatural (315) and exceed normal limits (267). Atreus himself gives no indication that his action, no matter how extreme, ever reaches the point of being sufficient or proportionate to its causes, at first saying, "This is good, this is ample, this is enough for now, even for me," then asking, "But why should it be enough?" Up to the closing act he insists, "even this is too little for me" (1052).

Thyestes, this moment comes when he finds himself resting on purple cloth and drinking from a gold cup, but now, at the terrible cost of feasting on his children's flesh (908-913). However, something of the truly tragic character of *this* play is lost since we no longer feel the individual has suffered at the hands of larger forces for which he was no match. Instead, the individual takes a decision at the behest of his own desires, which crucially, are not themselves determined by external causes, or not *sufficiently* determined by external causes. What, after all, could explain or justify Thyestes' immoderate desire for power?

5 From One Solution, Three

I would now like to show that, by solving one problem endemic to tragedy, Seneca also solves another set of problems, and that this is because the former problem is the cause of the others. It should now be clear that Seneca solves the chief problem—the problem of tragic conflict—by removing any reference to external causes that might make Thyestes' actions appear to result from external forces that compel him to act counter to his own wishes and intentions, after which point, we are left to infer that the bulk of the responsibility for Thyestes' actions lies with an internal cause, namely, Thyestes' immoderate desire.

This change made, the negative consequences of tragic conflict are avoided: first, there is no reason to fear one's actions will be determined by the result of a contest between internal and external forces, in which external forces are always the stronger party. Second, there is no reason to fear that external forces are in fundamental conflict with the individual's happiness. Thyestes indeed suffers terribly, but not because the world is fundamentally hostile to human objectives or human happiness. Third, and relatedly, there is no reason to fear that the individual's most deeply held aims and intentions will inevitably be thwarted or meet resistance from external forces, as Thyestes might easily have avoided this predicament.

Immediately, we can see how this simple change would have addressed

the further problem of audience identification discussed above. From the start of the play, Thyestes already has a desire for power that is disproportionate and well beyond what his circumstances could warrant or justify. So already, the audience is not likely to recognize the specific internal causes to which the protagonist is subject as ones that would be capable of moving *them*. More importantly, Thyestes subsequent actions, including his return to Argos, do not seem to be fully explained or justified by *external* causes. Identification requires that we find characters' actions to be reasonable responses to the external conditions that precede them. But since Thyestes' actions do not have external causes, or do not have causes that are sufficient to justify them, a possible doubt can be raised in the audience's mind as to whether the same causes would really produce the same reaction *in themselves*, and whether they—the audience—would really do the same thing in Thyestes' place.

Moreover, we typically we find it easy to identify with the internal struggle, and hence, the resulting actions, of a character whose initial internal motivations we find legitimate, and/or who we feel to be an unfortunate victim of circumstance. A typical tragic figure meets both these qualifications because he or she begins with legitimate motivations (for love or family loyalty) that suddenly come into conflict with demands (for justice or fealty) elicited in reaction to overwhelming external forces. Thyestes meets neither qualification: his internal conflict arises, on the one hand, because of an internal motivation that is flawed from the outset, and, on the other hand, not because of overwhelming external forces, but rather, because of an inborn and eminently reasonable desire for safety and security—further raising the question why he doesn't simply relinquish his initial motivation. Hence, we have no particular sympathy for his dilemma. (In this way, Seneca can be described as substituting a conflict of self-*versus*-self for a conflict of individual-*versus*-world, as I will explain below.) In brief, the reason we do not identify with Thyestes' internal conflict is that, whereas a typical tragic hero's internal struggle is thrust upon him or her, Thyestes' is self-made.

So overall, we feel no particular sympathy for (*i*.) Thyestes' initial desire

for power, nor any (*ii*.) when he undergoes an internal conflict because this desire conflicts with another, more legitimate desire—nor even, finally, (*iii*.) when, because of this desire, he undertakes a course of action that leads his legitimate desire for a quiet family life to be horribly dashed.

It could of course be argued that we *do* sympathize with Thyestes for his loss, and it is true that Seneca has not completely removed our identification with Thyestes *qua* grieving father. Certainly, the grotesque details of his children's death compounds our empathy for Thyestes—producing a fellow-feeling that may not be incompatible with Stoic *apatheia*.[25] Our reaction to this scene is also accompanied by an awareness that Thyestes' crime is comparatively small in relation to the disproportionately severe "punishment" it receives. But this is the extent of our identification. Importantly, we do not identify with Thyestes *qua* someone who has a legitimate attachment, which is cruelly wrested away by external forces beyond his control, since we still think Thyestes is more than a little responsible for what has happened: *we do not identify with him* qua *victim of a cruel fate.* Arguably, this already takes the sting out of our emotional response, or, at least, it does nothing to encourage any identification with Thyestes' *pathē*.[26] Indeed, provided we have already learned to accept the loss of a child stoically, the play will not provoke in us a more intense reaction to Thyestes' loss than we would have to another parent's. Most importantly, however, *we do not identify with Thyestes* qua *vicious person*: we do not identify with him with respect to the judgments and passions of his that lead to his eventual undoing.

Thus, by removing the intimation that Thyestes is subject to external forces, and solving the problem of tragic conflict, Seneca, in the process, largely solves the problem of the audience's identification with

25 As several scholars have pointed out, it would not necessarily contradict Stoic practice to feel momentary empathy for characters in a play. Such a reaction need not rise to the level of a passion as long as it is not accompanied by a false judgement. Indeed, Seneca describes the reactions of fear (*timor*) and sadness (*tistitia*) we feel while watching drama as *propatheiai* that fall short of full-blown passions (*De Ira* 2.2-5).

26 It should be noted that, whereas classical tragedy depends on encouraging the audience to share the protagonist's attachments in order to produce its dramatic effect—since the audience will only feel the protagonist is the unfortunate victim of a hostile fate if they share the same attachments—,Seneca, having already abandoned this aim, has nothing to gain by encouraging such attachments.

vicious characters. In retrospect, moreover, we can see why tragedies, as they are written during the poetic form's golden age, almost inevitably compel audiences to identify with vicious protagonists: first, they present a character's situation and subsequent actions as the product of a clash between seemingly reasonable internal intentions and uncontrollable external realities, and second, they present a character's actions as the product of external causes, indeed, as *over*-determined by a combination of external and internal forces, in light of which the character's actions not only seem to be explained, but justified. In brief, if plays depict conflicts of this kind then they necessarily *depict the protagonist's actions as reasonable and relatable responses to conflicts of this kind.*

Almost inevitably, once Seneca has removed any present danger of external causes that are at complete odds with the individual, no serious danger of conflict between internal and external forces still remains: inner and outer causes no longer threaten to drive the individual down divergent and contradictory paths of action. Once this conflict disappears from Seneca's plays, the plot necessarily revolves around the only conflict that still remains to be portrayed: the one kind of conflict that can still arise because it is precisely a conflict "of one's own making." It is the kind of conflict that, according to Stoicism, is created when the individual *him or herself* acts, without being compelled by external causes,[27] contrary to his or her better judgment such that he or she ends up at variance with him- or herself.[28]

This fact, that Seneca substitutes the conflict self-*versus*-self for the conflict individual-*versus*-world has already been observed obliquely. Christopher Gill, for example, focusing on madness in specific, observes that, when Senecan characters are driven to madness, their madness differs from that of characters in Greek tragedies. The latter exhibit a madness, which, he argues, following recent scholarship (Padel, 1992), is divinely inspired or otherwise induced by external causes.[29]

27 The Stoics stress that *pathē* are voluntary rather than non-voluntary movements of the soul (*Tusc.* 4.60. *Acad.* 1.5.38; *Noct. Att.* 19.1, *LS* 65Y).

28 Plut. *Vir Mor.* 446f-447a: *LS* 65G: *SVF* III.459.

29 Gill also observes that, whereas Greek characters sometimes address themselves, for example in *Medea* and *Phaedra*, one self does not refer to the other, as in Senecan drama, as "mad." He thus concludes that although these two plays contain scenes of internal conflict very similar to what we find

Gill argues that the madness Senecan characters exhibit is by contrast primarily akratic. However, Gill does not offer an explanation for Seneca's decision to portray his characters' passions in this distinctly Roman, as opposed to Greek, style except to say that this "psychologized and moralized" (1997, p. 219) depiction of the passions may be due to a general Roman tendency to follow the Stoics in associating all vice with this sort of madness (1997, p. 232, n. 74), or may have appealed to Seneca as means of showing passion's innerworkings (1997, p. 235). We, however, have just seen the real reason for this innovation.

Let us now turn to the second problem with tragedy, its confusion of virtues and vices, especially the conflation of *constantia* with vices it technically excludes. In classical tragedy, the fact that a character's actions appear necessitated by external causes adds to the impression that the character has already decided on a course of action and will not be moved from it—in itself, an admirable constancy. But, because the decision to undertake this course of action also seems to arise, in part, from a character flaw such as pride or ambition, this kind of constancy also appears to be partly vicious. Hence what results is a kind of *vicious constancy*. However, because a Senecan character is not necessitated by external causes in the same way, the audience is aware that the path he or she takes is one the character *might otherwise avoid were it not for a given vice*. We are thus aware that the character could very well have avoided this path, and *might still* abandon this course of action as soon as this vice is corrected. This impression is only further strengthened as, during the course of the play, the character *in fact* begins to vacillate or to think better of his or her decision. Hence, the little constancy the character might at first seem to display quickly appears as merely temporary, and therefore *not as genuine constancy at all*. In this way, vacillation serves the function of underscoring the fact that the character's constancy is not genuine *because it arises from vice*. It is important to emphasize this feature of Senecan drama, since many scholars have been taken in by the appearance of constancy in some of Seneca's more determined characters, Atreus and Medea being two such examples,

in Seneca's plays, "neither of the Greek tragic examples is quite parallel to the analogous Senecan cases" (Gill, 1997, pp. 220-221).

despite clear evidence that they are conflicted about their decisions.[30] This has driven many scholars to suppose that Seneca deliberately presents the Stoics' favorite virtue as, at worst, a vice and, at best, a neutral tool that can be used with equal adeptness in moral or immoral hands by suggesting the possible use of "Stoic consistency for non-Stoic ends" (Brower, 1971, pp. 164; also Miles, 1996, pp. 58-61; Star, 2006, pp. 209). However, these sorts of interpretations fail to take into account the extent to which Seneca focuses almost entirely on *self-conflict*, and thus, on characters who are precisely *inconstant*. He thus makes the vice of inconstancy the tragic flaw par excellence—one that is always accompanied by other vices.

Seneca ensures that Thyestes' internal conflict is not foisted upon him but self-made, thus ensuring that his *inconstantia* is a symptom and indicator of other vices. For it is precisely Thyestes' flaws that cause him to vacillate in the first place. Hence, at the very least, Seneca is able to show that inconsistency is *a vice that is caused by and accompanied by other vices*, rather than suggest, as classical tragedy seems to, that consistency is a virtue often accompanied by vices.

We can thus see why, if any Stoic considered the matter, they would be led to the conclusion that the way tragedies present conflict constitutes a serious structural problem for this particular poetic form, and not only this, but a problem that underlies all the other problems associated with this poetic art. The fact that Seneca considers the matter in this light is evident in his plays. Overall then, this leads to the conclusion that there is an important and heretofore unrecognized respect in which Seneca tailors his tragedies to Stoic sensibilities.

30 Atreus asks himself, "Why paralyzed (*quid stupes*)? At long last, rouse your heart and begin (*tandem incipe animosque sume*: *Thyst*. 241-242)," and then again, "Why take fright again my spirit, and slacken before the event? Come, you must be bold (*anime, quid rursus times at ante rem subsidis? audendum est, age*: 283-284)." Medea vacillates at length from 925 to 944 and again at 988. Clytemnestra's vacillation in Act Two of *Agamemnon* is legend (111, 137-140, 239).

6 Other Senecan Tragedies

I would now like to turn to some of Seneca's other tragedies in order to show that they display some of the same patterns as the *Thyestes*. Here, a few caveats are in order. First, I do not intend to imply that Seneca has a single strategy for "Stoicizing" tragedy that he uniformly applies to all his plays. Seneca's plays are too diverse to be described as the output of a single formula and Seneca probably experimented with different devices throughout his career. However, it can be shown that Seneca draws from a repertoire of similar strategies in writing his plays. It is not likely to be a mere coincidence that they all make his plays less objectionable from the perspective of Stoicism.

Secondly, although my own treatment of these texts must necessarily be brief and selective, given considerations of space, nevertheless, a fuller confirmation of my hypothesis would require a detailed analysis of each play mentioned here, as well as others I have not mentioned. Such detailed analyses would have the advantage both of bringing to light the various devices that Seneca employs in "Stoicizing" tragedy and also elucidating the way in which Seneca's use of these devices changes and develops over the various stages of his career.

I spoke above of the way that Seneca removes from the *Thyestes* any suggestion that the protagonists' actions are determined by external forces. If my hypothesis is correct, then this should also be the case in other plays. To be sure, this is certainly not a strategy Seneca adopts universally.[31] However, in many cases, he does remove the gods, in particular, as a cause of the protagonist's actions. For example, whereas in Euripides' *Hippolytus*, Aphrodite appears at the outset to announce that she will punish Hippolytus for failing to revere her, no such scene occurs in Seneca's *Phaedra*. Instead, Phaedra herself actually tries, but *fails*, to blame the gods for her fit of passion (185-200), and is pointedly

31 One obvious exception is *Hercules Furens*. As in Euripides' version, Juno is directly responsible for driving Hercules mad. This play used to be considered an early work, in part because Seneca seems to intentionally present Hercules in a quite different light in *Hercules On Oeta*, but modern stenography places the play among a middle group of works (Marshall, 2014, pp. 38). Nonetheless, it can be, and has been argued that the extreme violence of Hercules' madness is not "caused externally as in Euripides" (Pratt, 1983, pp. 119).

rebuffed by the nurse, who points out that people have invented such stories just to justify their own passions (195).

If my hypothesis is correct, then fate should also not be cited as an exculpating cause for the actions of protagonists. And indeed, in *Phaedra*, the nurse insists that Phaedra's passion *not* be understood as fated, but rather as a product of her character: "This outrage is far worse than monstrous, for the monstrous is attributable to fate, but crime to character" (*nam monstram fato, moribus scelera imputes*: 144-145). Not only this, Seneca presents Phaedra's chosen course of action not as caused by, but as *defying* fate and the gods. So whereas Euripides' Phaedra acts at the instigation of a deity, Seneca's acts in rebellion against the gods, of whose defiance she is warned:

> Who will let such a deed lie unconcealed? Parents care is shrewd. But suppose we conceal such an outrage by cunning and deceit: what of him who pours his light on the world, your mother's father? What of him who shakes the heavens, brandishing the bolt from Etna in his glittering hand, procreator of the gods? Do you suppose that it can be managed that between these all-seeing grandfathers you will not be seen? (145- 158)

In contrast to classical tragic figures, Senecan characters are described more often in passages like these as acting *against*, rather than at the behest of the gods.[32] Moreover, they are also described as acting *against* rather than at the behest of fate. For example, Euripides' Medea claims to be acting with the gods' approval and assistance (160, 674, 1013), a claim which is confirmed at the play's end with the appearance of the chariot of the sun. Indeed, even at the precise moment she kills her children, she is described as "the victim of an evil fate" (1275). Seneca's Medea meanwhile, is portrayed as rebelling *against* fate when she is told to submit to it. She stubbornly refuses, asserting, "Fortune can take away my wealth, but not my spirit" (174-177).

32 Another example can be found in Seneca's *Trojan Women*, when, according to Agamemnon, Pyrrhus tempts the gods by neglecting "what actions the conquerors may rightly take" (257). He tests his luck when he should be "fearing overly favorable gods" (262).

Although Seneca's preferred strategy seems to be to eliminate all reference to fate, he does not entirely omit all discussion of fate, nor would this be to his advantage, since a tragedy must apparently contain some reference to forces that exceed the individual's comprehension and control if it is to maintain its distinctly tragic "feel." How Seneca deals with fate, when he *does* invoke it, can be seen in his *Agamemnon*, perhaps the Senecan play that contains the greatest number of allusions to fate.

In the prologue to *Agamemnon*, we again encounter Thyestes, the now deceased father of the play's chief villain, Aegisthus. Thyestes also appears as an unsavory character in this play, appearing from beyond the grave to cheer on his son's attempt to avenge him. Recalling his role in setting the stage for the events that are about to unfold, Thyestes at first takes responsibility for being the chief catalyst for his family's most recent series of misfortunes, but, at the same time, he casts himself as a victim of Fortuna (28), even claiming that he was compelled by fate (*coacta fatis*: 33) to sleep with his own daughter, since an oracle made him an uncertain promise (*fides incerta*: 38) that, if he did so, the son he fathered would avenge him.[33] However, we should not accept Thyestes' attempts to deflect responsibility for his role in the present drama uncritically. For one thing, the unfolding series of events to which Thyestes is now claiming to be a passive spectator are ones that he is, even now, boasting of (25) and cheering on (44).[34] Thus, to the extent that Seneca wants us to accept the notion that something like "fate" is at work here, he seems to want us to understand this "fate," as much as is possible, as something that each generation has an active hand—not just a passive role—in perpetuating for the next. The same could be said of the role of fate in the prologue to *Thyestes*: where fate *is* mentioned, it appears as little as possible as a force external to and hostile to human beings and as much as possible as a product of human action which is in

33 It is significant that the oracle is referred to as uncertain. The overall effect of the prologue is to make Thyestes an excited spectator to the main action of the play, who nervously waits to see if the action unfolds in the way an unreliable oracle said it would—not to put a prophecy in Thyestes' mouth.

34 He seems to describe the action his son is now about to undertake as if it were what he was destined for: "The reason for your birth has come, Aegisthus," he says (48). But we, the audience, understand that, Aegisthus is "destined for" murder primarily in the sense that killing Agamemnon is the purpose for which Aegisthus' father created him. Thyestes thus seems to bear a significant share of the responsibility for what is about to happen.

human control.[35] In general then, Seneca seems to preserve reference to "fate" when it can be understood as something that human beings make for themselves—something over which, he implies, they can always re-assert control.

How then does Seneca deal with Cassandra's prophecy of Agamemnon's murder, which plays such a central role in the traditional Agamemnon myth and contributes so dramatically to the "fate-like" atmosphere of Aeschylus's play? In Aeschylus's version of the play, Cassandra sees the past as well as the future, lingering on Thyestes' crimes and how they have given birth to an endless succession of avenging crimes (1091-1104, 1183-1201,1215-1241). Seneca, however, does not present Casandra, as Aeschylus does, as having a vision of the past, present, and future crimes of the family, as if co-fated and linked in inevitable succession. Instead, he cleverly has Cassandra perceive a certain foreboding resemblance between the days leading up to Troy's fall and the demise of its king, Priam, and the present moment in Argos, as if she saw Argos superimposed over a picture of Troy (726-733, 792-796). In this way, as well as through a series of visions (of the underworld, then of a woman with a knife, and then a lioness and a hyena), Cassandra predicts Agamemnon's death—*without* implying that the basis for this prediction is a chain of necessitating causes that make the crime inevitable.[36]

35 The prologue to Thyestes focuses on the curse that hangs over the house, which might be said to make Atreus' actions "fated." But whereas other tragedians might use this curse to lay some blame at the feet of external causes, Seneca emphasizes that the chain of causes ultimately leads back to Atreus' grandfather, Tantalus, and his original crime: an offence he committed in wantonness and rebellion against the gods. Seneca appears to introduce an innovation, making it part of Tantalus' punishment—"Has something worse been devised than thirst parched amidst water..?"(4)—that he must, on the instructions of a fury, set his descendants house in disorder. Thus, the audience is reminded that what is about to transpire has not been caused by greater forces that are opaque to human beings, but rather, is something for which human actors are ultimately responsible. Another alternative is to read the opening scene symbolically, as Fitch suggests: "as he [Tantalus] rises from the underworld, so desire rises from the irrational depths of the mind." However, Fitch does not exclude that Act One also indicates a causal relationship between Tantalus' actions and his grandsons' (Fitch, 2004, p. 222).

36 In Aeschylus' version, in fact, the events to come are foretold in more than a few ways: a curse has been put on Agamemnon (457), and the chorus awaits bad news as soon as nightfall (459). Not only are the gods not the constant presence they are in Aeschylus' Agamemnon, gone from Seneca's version are the countless references to certain and inescapable events we find in Aeschylus's version, starting with the decade-old prophecy, with which the Aeschylean version opens, that Iphegenia will be killed and her slaughter will be avenged by "a fearsome, guileful keeper of the house, a Wrath that remembers and will avenge a child" (155).

We also do not find the same emphasis on necessity and necessitating causes as in Aeschylus' version, as when Aeschylus has the chorus say Zeus teaches human beings a lesson by force (biaos: 182), and describes Agamemnon as putting on "the yokestrap of necessity" (anankas edu lepadnon: 218). By contrast, while Seneca's play creates the atmospheric effect of an event on the horizon toward which present circumstances are tending, it does all this without directly attributing the events of the play to necessitating causes.

Another strategy that Seneca uses in *Agamemnon*, as well as in many other plays,[37] is to use choral odes to suggest that the events depicted in the play are "fated" only in a very specific and limited sense, for example:

> Though weapons cease and treacheries cease,
> greatness sinks by its very weight,
> good fortune is a burden that crushes itself. (87-89)

The ode continues:

> …the lofty hills are struck by lightning,
> larger physiques are prone to disease,
> and while the common
> cattle run out to roam and graze,
> the loftiest neck is chosen for the axe.
> Whatever Fortune raises on high,
> she lifts to cast down. (96-102)

Fortune is explicitly referred to in the last two lines (*quidquid in altum Fortuna tulit, ruitura levat*), but from context we can see that the 'Fortuna' to which these lines refer is a law of nature or universal truth: great things are vulnerable to destruction. This means that the demise of great things can more or less be predicted to occur sooner or later. In that sense, they are all "fated" to be destroyed. But this is not to say

37 See for example Trojan Women: "The higher Fortune raises and exalts human might, the more the fortunate should humble themselves and tremble at shifting circumstance, fearing overly favorable gods" (259-263, cf. 1-4, 529-531).

the specific events that occur in the play, are necessarily under the control of certain and specific forces, or will inevitably be brought about through the action of certain and specific external causes. They are not necessarily "fated" in *that* sense. As with so many of the devices mentioned above therefore, this one creates a general atmosphere familiar from classical tragedy by creating the vague feeling that the events we are about to witness have something inevitable—even inescapable—about them at the same time that it also allows Seneca to avoid directly asserting they are "fated" in the strict sense of 'determined by external causes over which humans have no control.'

In some respects, the changes Seneca makes to tragedy are all the more remarkable given that they are relatively minor: in most cases, he merely reduces mention of external causes to a bare minimum. But as we have seen, this small change is sufficient, in most cases, to change the conflict at the center of the play, and ultimately, to make tragedy more responsive to Stoic concerns.

Overall, then, I hope to have shown that there were three problems with tragedy with which Seneca would have had to grapple, and that his plays suggest some ways in which he may have sought to address these problems. The foregoing should further show that, in answer to the question whether Seneca's plays are "Stoic," we need not conclude, either that Seneca abandoned Stoicism to write tragedy, or that he intentionally set out to write Stoic tragedies. Nor is this the question from which an inquiry into Senecan tragedy should begin. As I hope to have shown, the more fundamental question is which elements of tragedy Stoics regarded as problematic, and whether, with adjustments, these elements *could* be rendered compatible with Stoicism. Having now shown that Seneca *did* have some methods at his disposal for making tragedy less objectionable from a Stoic point of view, and that, in fact, Seneca appears to have availed himself of these methods, we can safely conclude that he did *indeed* pursue a third course of action and retain as much of tragedy as possible while minimizing its dangers. Whether Seneca was actually able to do this without depriving tragedy of its tragic character and changing it beyond recognition is a question

for another day.

7 Conclusion

In conclusion, Seneca changes the conflict at the center of classical tragedy so that the protagonists of his plays no longer suffer a conflict between internal causes driving them from within and external causes compelling them from without, the latter of which ultimately overwhelm the former. By employing various strategies for deemphasizing the role of external causes in instigating protagonists' internal conflicts and their resulting actions, he reframes tragedy around a conflict internal to the individual. Doing so allows him to solve two of the most important problems Stoics had identified with poetry: that of the audience's identification with vicious protagonists and that of the combination of virtues and vices in a single protagonist. By these means, Seneca is able to produce tragedies that agree more with Stoic sensibilities, or at least, do not too overtly offend them.

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