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Seneca, what Seneca? The Chorus in *The Spanish Tragedy*

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ABSTRACT

The question of Senecan influence on Elizabethan tragedy has been fiercely debated since J.W. Cunliffe published his seminal study in 1893. In the last half-century massive critical attention to this problem has been renewed. Recent interpretations of Senecan influence vary enormously, but there continues to be a tacit convergence on the view established by Cunliffe, namely that influence must be understood as a matter of local motif borrowing. This view is underpinned by the assumption that Senecan drama is made up of loosely related rhetorical exercises and that it thus lacks any coherent tragic vision. Building on recent work that challenges this bias against the plays as plays, this article re-examines the function of the Chorus in Seneca in order to transcend its interpretation as a static appendage of Stoic commonplaces. Rather than interrupting the flow of the action, the Senecan Chorus is carefully designed to evolve with the former so that it generates an overwhelming tragic climax. This climax is that of the avenger's *furor*, understood as tragic solipsism. It is this evolving Chorus and its vengeful madness that Kyd assimilated into his pioneering play of the 1580s.

KEYWORDS: Senecan drama, Senecan influence, Elizabethan revenge tragedy, Kyd, chorus

1. The question of Senecan influence

The early Elizabethan public stage betrays unmistakable signs of Senecan activity. We have, of course, the external evidence provided by Thomas Nashe's famous attack on a popular playwright, whose methods he decries as characteristic of the popular trade, that is, of those who

busy themselves with the endeavours of art, that could scarcely Latinize their neck-verse if they should have need; yet English Seneca read by candle-light yields many good sentences, as *Blood is a beggar* and so forth; and if you entreat him fair in a frosty morning he will afford you whole Hamlets, I should say handfuls, of tragical

speeches. But O grief! *Tempus edax rerum*. What's that will last always? The sea exhaled by drops will in continuance be dry, and Seneca, let blood line by line and page by page, at length must needs die to our stage; which makes his famished followers [...] to intermeddle with Italian translations. Wherein how poorly they have plodded [...] let all indifferent gentlemen that have travelled in that tongue discern by their twopenny pamphlets. (1958: 315-316)¹

But, in addition, we also have an abundance of literal quotations from the Latin originals, and of derivative and parodical *sententiae* from these, together with the reproduction of specific motifs and scenic designs to suggest that a vogue for Seneca attended the rise of Elizabethan public tragedy in the 1580s. Arguing that the fact "that the professional dramatists (and their audiences too) were as well acquainted with Seneca in Latin as in translation is shown by their fondness for quotation from the original" (Watling 1966: 29), a recent translator of the Senecan plays illustrates the point with a sequence that is typical of the vogue in question. In Seneca's *Agamemnon* we read, "*per scelera semper sceleribus tutum est iter*," which Watling translates as "the safe way through crime is by [further] crimes." Studley turned it into as "the safest path to mischief is by mischief open still." Thomas Hughes in his Inns-of-court play *The Misfortunes of Arthur* (1587) rendered it as "the safest passage is from bad to worse"; Marton's *The Malcontent* (1604) into "Black deed only through black deed safely flies" (to which the reply is made: "Pooh! *Per scelera semper sceleribus tutum est iter*"); Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (1606) as "Things bad begun make strong themselves by ill"; Jonson's *Catiline* (1611) as "The ills that I have done cannot be safe/ But by attempting greater"; Webster's *The White Devil* (1612) as "Small mischiefs are by greater made secure"; and Massinger's *The Duke of Milan* (1620) as "One deadly sin, then, help to cure another" (1966, 29-31). These Senecan tags may have been intended to give a "Senecan flavouring" to Elizabethan plays (Watling 1966: 30); but the Senecan material assimilated into these plays would by no means be exhausted by any comprehensive list of surviving *sententiae*. This is confirmed by the two major studies of Senecan influence on the public drama to appear in the recent years: Robert S. Miola's 1992 *Shakespeare and Classical Tragedy*, and A. J. Boyle's 1997 *Tragic Seneca*.

¹ Nashe's famous quip is understood as "at least a fair indication that Elizabethan playwrights were familiar with contemporary translations of the plays" (Brower 1971: 148). But alternative sceptical interpretations exist. See, for example, Hunter (1978: 193-194).

Both of these exhaustive studies demonstrate the astonishing range of Senecan material absorbed by the Elizabethan playwrights. After Miola and Boyle we are in a better position to recognize how well-known Seneca was to the public playwrights of the 1580s and '90s. If Senecan influence were just a matter of *sententiae*, one could argue – indeed some, like Hunter, have done so – that the Senecan tags were transmitted by the anthological compilations of which the age was so fond. That this is not the case, however, can be illustrated by the borrowings Miola identifies in *Titus Andronicus*, a play closely modelled on *The Spanish Tragedy*. In *Titus*, “sometimes considered the most Senecan of Shakespeare’s plays” (1992: 13), two slightly altered Latin quotations from Senecan drama stand out: Demetrius’s “*Per Stygia, per manes vehor*” (II.i.135) and Titus’s “*Magni Dominator poli, / Tam lentus audis scelera? Tam lentus vides?*” (IV.i.81-2), which derive respectively from II. 1180 and 671-2 of *Phaedra*. Now, these lines do not seem to feature in any of the more popular anthologies and *florilegia* of the period, whence Miola concludes that they “provide evidence of direct contact with Seneca” (1992: 13). Furthermore, Senecan material is by no means confined to these Latin quotations, nor is it extracted from a single play. Thus, *Phaedra* also contributes to “Shakespeare’s sense of locality” by providing a precedent in its extraordinary opening hunting scene in Act II of *Titus*. Moreover, *Titus*’s more general resemblances with aspects of *Troades* and *Thyestes* argue for influence of a different order of abstractness. Shakespeare’s play, for example, exhibits “similar configurations of action, character, and design” to *Troades*, which are quite central to the design of the plays: “both plays feature a vanquished mother who struggles in vain to preserve the life of a son; both depict human sacrifice in honour of the valiant dead; and both make use of the tomb as a potent symbolic setting” (Miola 1992: 19). With *Thyestes* the link becomes harder to locate both in source and in recipient – “a deep source of its energy and aesthetics of violence” (Miola 1992: 23) – and yet it seems more fundamental to the imaginative experience of the play, becoming a creative and intellectual engagement. In the face of this range of evidence – and Miola provides similar analyses of *Hamlet*, *Richard III*, *Macbeth*, *Othello*, *King Lear*, and even some comedies, such as *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, and which Boyle extends even further – it is difficult to maintain that the Elizabethan public playwrights had at best a negligible acquaintance with Seneca’s plays.

By and large, scholarship now accepts that Seneca was a shaping factor in the emergence of public drama.² However, to identify the presence of Senecan material in the Elizabethan plays and to interpret it are not quite the same. In its century-long history, the debate has narrowed down to specific motifs in disregard of the general tragic vision in which they originate. In other words, the evidence of an Elizabethan engagement with Seneca has been taken as the meaning of this engagement. Thus, the question of the availability of Seneca to public playwrights has covertly become the question of what we mean by Seneca. The result can be illustrated by any random description of the history of Elizabethan drama. George Steiner, for instance, in his book on the tragic genre makes a passing remark on Elizabethan Seneca:

The playhouse of Shakespeare and his contemporaries was *el gran teatro del mundo*. No variety, no element from the crucible of experience, was alien to his purpose. The Elizabethan and Jacobean dramatists ransacked Seneca. They took from him his rhetoric, his ghosts, his sententious morality, his flair for horror and blood-vengeance; but not the austere, artificial practices of the neo-classic stage. (1961: 20-21)

Here Steiner is (for once) not being controversial; he is simply echoing the conclusions of Elizabethan criticism: the Senecan legacy is seen as a treasure trove of rhetorical and sensational pearls used by Elizabethan authors to adorn their plays, the spoils of war gained in their expeditions into classical drama – that is to say, a fragmentary Seneca subservient to moralizing revenge melodrama.

Classical scholarship is largely responsible for this fragmented notion of the Senecan plays, but in the case of its influence on Elizabethan drama, it was established in 1893 by J.W. Cunliffe's *The Influence of Seneca on Elizabethan Tragedy*, and it has governed the use of Senecan criticism to this day. The premise on which Cunliffe proceeded was that "the influence of Seneca (or, to speak more correctly, of the tragedies ascribed to him) upon the Elizabethan

² It has become customary for critics to state their view on the question, as a critical *prise de position*: e.g. Brower: "if we should yield to the agreeable temptation to pass over Seneca and his example, we should find a considerable loss in our ability to define the nature of Shakespearian heroic tragedy. There are simply too many instructive analogies and contrasts to leave Seneca out" (1971: 149); or Emrys Jones: "it seems to me likely that Shakespeare (to confine the discussion to him) would have had a knowledge not merely of phrases from anthologies or of discrete passages but of at least some entire plays" (1977: 268).

drama is so plainly marked that no competent historian of our literature could fail to notice it" (1965: 1). In order to establish this, Cunliffe compiled an extensive inventory of Senecan borrowings in Elizabethan drama. The inventory is organized in sections dealing with the features of Senecan tragedy that were allegedly incorporated into the Elizabethan plays. A mention of the title of some of these sections shows how extraordinarily influential Cunliffe's study has been. Seneca is "Instrospective" (section 3), "Sensational" (section 4), "Rhetorical" (section 5); and the substantiation of Cunliffe's claim that "the most obvious way in which Seneca affected the modern drama was in external form" has been equally influential, as the following topics show: "Aphorisms" (p.23), "Fatalism" (p.25), "Stoicism" (p.28), "the Chorus" (p.32), "the Messenger" (p.43), "the Ghost" (p.44), "Use of the Supernatural" (p.44), etc. The examples he provided to exemplify each section and each formal feature were taken from academic and public plays alike, no qualitative distinction between them being introduced or local effects acknowledged.

Subsequent criticism has challenged Cunliffe's identification of parallel passages, both in its conclusions about particular cases of borrowing and its over-generous inclusiveness. Nonetheless, the main assumption behind his study – that Seneca provided sensational dramatic material – has been largely accepted.³ As a result, a fragmented Seneca has discredited *ab initio* the possibility of an integrated Senecan tragic vision to which Kyd and Shakespeare could have responded in their drama. Even today, scholars continue to take for granted that Seneca must mean Cunliffe's "Seneca" when discussing its influence on Elizabethan plays. It is no surprise, then, to find the same motley collection of features identified as a tradition even in the most recent work on early Elizabethan public tragedy:

Kyd writes out of the Senecan tradition, where the plays are characterized by a plot pivoting around revenge, with a supernatural presence of some kind or another, usually in the form of a ghost, a tragic protagonist and a great deal of blood and violence. The antiquity of the medium, in Renaissance writings, is signalled by a markedly formal style and the interspersing of classical quotations. (Plesse 2003: 206)

³ For a discussion of Senecan influence criticism see "A Critique of Scholarly Trends," in Motto and Clark (1988: 21-42), and Kiefer (1985).

That there exists a unified Senecan tragic vision and that this had a formative impact on early Elizabethan revenge tragedy is an alternative assumption that has been rendered more than conceivable by the publication of Gordon Braden's 1985 *Renaissance Tragedy and the Senecan Tradition: Anger's Privilege*. In his groundbreaking study, which has not yet been fully recognized as such, Braden shows that Roman tragedy offers a consistent and powerful tragic vision that encompasses but transcends the Stoic doctrine expounded in Seneca's prose works. The first step towards the establishment of a unified Senecan vision is the establishment of an affective, or psychological, Seneca. And the first step towards the establishment of the affective Seneca is the recognition that madness is what defines the experience of the tragic revenge. This is why Braden proposes to reclaim the centrality of *furor* to Seneca's tragic vision. In Braden's reading, *furor* is not just the most conspicuous aspect of the plays, it is also the key to their meaning.

Admittedly, *furor* is not a theme exclusive of Senecan tragedy: it characterizes much of the Latin non-lyrical production of the first century, as the work of Lucan, almost dominated by "titanic figures of insatiable appetite for conquest and destruction" shows (1985: 28). But this does not mean that it can be simply dismissed as a period feature. Its centrality has to be explained if this drama is to be accorded a meaning more profound than sheer sensationalism. To take *furor* seriously means not to take its meaning for granted as outrageous passion at the service of melodrama. It is not a coincidence that those who, like Hunter, reject the idea of Senecan influence on Elizabethan drama tend to regard *furor* in this light, as a generalized expression of unreason, devoid of any psychological content. Hunter never discovers a Seneca *tragicus* other than that of conventional Stoic doctrine. Hence the plays are seen as conflicts of two abstract, impersonal forces:

When Seneca's slaves of passion are taken over by inhuman or anti-human emotions they are released from human responsibility [...] they become the vessels or instruments of the *furor* which is personified by the *Furiae* we meet in the infernal prologues [...] It is impossible to know just how subjective or how objective Seneca intended *Erynis* or *Megaera* to be, but clearly we are not dealing with a fluctuation of inner mood. A more objective description of human processes seems to be involved: reason has struggled with *furor* and lost, and thereafter the inner resource of the individual is empty and the infernal passions take its place. (1978: 185)

By de-personalizing *furor* as an abstract passion, indeed as Passion itself, Hunter reduces tragic experience to moral certitude. This reduction is typical of conventional instincts to supplant the subjective origins of *furor*, rooted in the character's conflict, with an objective aetiology, rooted in the philosophical tradition. Instead of an affective crisis Hunter perceives a Manichean allegory. This is the consequence of taking *furor* for granted when analysing the plays.

To counter this reductive medievalization of Senecan tragedy, Braden proposes an investigation into the content of *furor* that achieves an understanding of the devastation it unleashes:

Even the recent revival of scholarly respect for the plays has tended to take the inexplicability of *furor* for granted: the opposite for *ratio*, it is a primal force of unreason that cannot be managed or diverted, only suppressed or resisted. That is the usual result of applying Seneca's philosophy directly to the plays, which then become cautionary fables about the destructive intractability of irrational *pathé*. (1985: 130)

Rejecting the fragmentation of the plays into incoherent rhetorical exercises, Braden aims at an integrated reading in which *furor* is seen as a drive for self-sufficiency that achieves the latter only at the price of madness. This interpretation reveals a Seneca totally different from the conventional one. From an examination of the principal revenge plays, *Medea* and *Thyestes*, in relation to Greek tragedy, and of the extant fragments of other Roman tragedies, he concludes that Senecan drama is characterized by the absence of any social and familial web that could contain and hence relativize the hero's *furor*. To a large extent, Senecan tragedy is the product of a crazed obliteration of this web. When, for example, *Medea* is confronted by the loss of her "interpersonal bearings" (her familial, social and national position), she produces "a gesture of mythic self-possession, establishing personal identity as a force that transcends its origin and context." As a result, the killing of *Medea*'s children appears as "part of a programmatic destruction of ties to the human race" (1985: 34). For this reason, the typical plot of a Senecan play takes the form of an "inner passion which burst upon and desolates an unexpected and largely uncomprehending world" that is, of an enactment "of the mind's disruptive power over external reality" (1985: 39). Thus, at the heart of Senecan drama Braden discovers a tragic dialectic of self and non-self, which manifests itself in the insanity of "an expansive and seemingly illimitable selfhood" (1985:42). What Braden reveals is that *furor* is a form of madness that aims at the

realization of an illusion of individual autonomy beyond almost any limit. At its most fundamental, Braden's analysis reveals a consistent tragic vision to which a crisis of identity, and the despairing megalomania it provokes, is the central issue.

After Braden, the question of what may be termed the public Seneca – that is, of a specifically tragic Seneca assimilated into the plays of the Elizabethan public stage – presents itself with renewed urgency. Critical tags like "Senecan revenge," mechanically applied to any crime scene in Renaissance drama, demand a re-examination. In the light of the new content assigned to *furor*, it is arguable, for example, that Kyd's representation of madness in *Hieronimo*, which set a vogue for revenge lasting well into the seventeenth century, is modelled on it. In this perspective, Senecan influence ceases to be regarded as a matter of local borrowing and becomes an intellectual engagement that proved fundamental to the emergence of public drama in the late 1580s and early '90s. Needless to say, it is well beyond the scope of this article to make a full case for this thesis. In what follows I shall concentrate on the play that set the vogue for revenge drama on the Elizabethan public stage, namely, Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*, specifically on its reception of the chorus, generally agreed to be of Senecan derivation. In doing so, I intend to show that an integrative perspective on Senecan drama that restores its cohesiveness both to the individual plays and to the tragic corpus as a whole is not only possible but necessary in order to appreciate the creative debt that English Renaissance drama owes to it.

2. The chorus in Senecan tragedy

No analysis of Senecan drama can be complete which omits to consider the role of the Chorus. Its presence in the plays is spectacular and its function central to the meaning of the tragic experience. Nonetheless, no other major element in Senecan drama is more misrepresented. This failure is a product of the critical bias against the dramatic quality of the plays as plays, the Choruses being regarded as their least dramatic expression. However, there are clear signs in the criticism that the interaction between the Chorus and the plot has been far from well understood. Differing critical perceptions of the Chorus's function have generated an unresolved polarity. Howard Baker, for example, feels that what characterizes the Senecan Chorus is its intimate involvement with the tragic events:

Seneca's choruses are composed of people fairly intimately allied with the protagonists [...] rather than being strictly interpretative agents, [they] are strictly choral adjuncts to the action; they are extensive enough to share acts with the protagonists [...] they participate with messengers and other characters. (1939: 143)

In puzzling contrast, what Braden – to take another example – regards as typical of the Senecan plays is the detachment of the choruses from the action:

[In Senecan drama] the Chorus has become almost completely disengaged from the action. It takes virtually no part in the dialogue and is rarely referred to at all by the characters; its odes, now clearly set as formal dividers in a five-act structure, seldom have more than the most general links to the surrounding action. (1985: 35)

These contradictory perceptions are by critics too well acquainted with the plays to come up with a totally distorted picture. It would seem, then, that one has to accept that the Chorus is at times deeply engaged with the tragic action, and at other times quite distanced from it. This would seem to offer an interesting ambiguity, yet its significance is never considered. Instead, one finds a consensus on the Chorus's static, utterly undramatic nature, together with the assignment of a moralizing purpose to it. For example, Norman Pratt, discussing the Chorus of *Medea*, reaches this conclusion:

The Argo odes are typical of many of the Senecan choruses. The function of the Corinthians is not fully dramatic. They have no organic part in the action and no clear individuality, only general characteristics and attitudes, such as antagonism towards Medea, which attach them to this play. On the other hand, these odes serve the purpose of the kinds of drama Seneca is writing, educative exhortatory drama demonstrating the destructive forces in human nature. The Argo theme is developed to show the absolute nature of the evil portrayed in Medea. Seneca is using the Chorus for philosophical commentary on the significance of the action, communicating directly to the audience the lesson of the drama. (1983: 87)

Pratt's assertion that the Chorus "stands above the dramatic events, not deriving insights from events, but giving insights to them" (1983:

79) is entirely representative of Senecan criticism.⁴ As usual, the *coup de grace* is performed, with much relish, by G. K. Hunter, who concludes that the Senecan Chorus is nothing more than “a dead letter” (1978: 167).

Generally speaking, the Chorus in Seneca is understood to represent the middle stage in the history of its abolition in drama. In Greek tragedy, the story goes, the Chorus is naturally integrated into the dramatic whole of which it forms an indispensable element. By contrast, in Seneca the Chorus constitutes a qualitatively different entity from the rest of the play; its presence is felt as an interruption of rather than a contribution to the dramatic flow. As C.W. Mendell puts it in his book-long comparison of Greek and Roman tragedy (a comparison that, needless to say, is always unfavourable to Roman tragedy): “It is a further step in the decline of the chorus as an essential part of the play and therefore another factor contributing to its ultimate elimination. [...] Already it *makes* the breaks between acts instead of *filling* breaks created by the natural dramatic progress of the play” (1968: 135). Cunliffe fully subscribes to this view: “[the Senecan] choruses,” he concludes, “could be cut out without any injury to the plot, and in some cases might even be transferred from one tragedy to another without loss of appropriateness” (1965: 33). Hence this interpretation has proved particularly influential with Elizabethan scholars, who see the Chorus in Kyd and Shakespeare as the product of the academic adaptation of Seneca in the 1560s and ‘80s. In their view, the process of choric dissolution started by Seneca and accelerated by the Elizabethan academic playwrights and translators finds its culmination in the public plays of the 1580s and ‘90s. Charlton, for example, observes that the Elizabethan translations of Seneca tend to be freer in dealing with the Chorus, which they invariably shorten. The assumption that underpins this view is that the Chorus is intrinsically undramatic:

those [alterations] affecting the Chorus are greatest: thus at the outset the translators are instinctively preparing Seneca for the theatre by coping with the most obvious impediment to his appearance on the

⁴ Nussbaum’s well-known analysis is no exception: “unlike the Euripidean Chorus, Seneca’s is not sympathetic to Medea. Throughout it is the sober voice of Stoic morality, counseling the extirpation of passion, the containment of daring – a life that stays at home with its own virtue, never overstepping the limits of nature” (1994: 240). In the course of her discussion Nussbaum qualifies this assertion, but the function of the Chorus, as she conceives it, remains purely doctrinal.

modern stage. Neville frequently shortens Seneca's choruses, and the mere shortening is a dramatic gain in the direction of ultimate exclusion.⁵ (1946: 161)

Furthermore, whether or not one assumes that the academics derived this treatment from Seneca, what is clear is that both in the academic and the public drama the Chorus has a moralizing function. Thus Baker regards the moral function of the Choruses in *Gorboduc* as a precedent for the public Choruses of Kyd and the early Shakespeare:

It is singly and alone as an interpreter of what has gone before (especially the symbolic material presented in the dumb shows) and what is to come afterwards that the Chorus in *Gorboduc* functions. So, too, in general, functions the Chorus, in so far as it persists, in the later tragedy. (1939 :143)

It seems to me that Baker's description of the Chorus in *Gorboduc* is quite accurate. In effect, the play introduces every Act by means of a musical dumb show in which a symbolic representation is enacted. At the end of the Act the Chorus spells out the moral truth signified by the dumb show, which now appears as a warning against the misfortunes enacted in the intervening Act. Thus, the Chorus makes of each of the five Acts a self-contained unit at the expense of the momentum of the play; the meaning of the play is established in a cumulative way (as an aggregation of moral episodes) rather than in a culminative way (as an overall design tending towards a final revelation). But this is not the dramatic scheme we find in either Seneca, or Kyd, or Shakespeare; and I would argue further that the role of the Chorus contributes to this. Contrary to the established view, my contention is that a) an attentive examination of the Senecan Chorus reveals that it is far from static, and not irrelevant to the tragic representation; and b) it is the dynamic Chorus of Seneca, rather than the static Chorus of academic drama, that Kyd assimilated into his seminal play, among whose much-celebrated innovative features is the upper-stage presence of Revenge.

⁵ Charlton cites as supporting evidence Heywood's remark that "such alteracyon [of the Chorus] may be borne with all, seeing that the Chorus is no part of the substance of the matter" (1946: 159). For Charlton, only the Elizabethan public playwrights solved the problem by virtue of the fact that "the philosophical atmosphere which is the excuse for the dull sermons of the Chorus was to be more cogently supplied by closer attention to the portrayal of character" (1946: 170).

In general terms, the Senecan Chorus – often in conjunction with an infernal Prologue – casts a shadow of fatality over the unwitting characters, whose actions thus appear to obey a supra-human as well as a human logic. This creates a double perspective on events: on one level the tragic conflict is perceived to be generated by the psychic crises of deeply socialized characters (fathers, mothers, lovers, etc); on a parallel level it is seen to be governed by a supra-human, abstract dictate – a curse, generational in *Thyestes* (the curse of the house of Pelops), and mythical in *Medea* (the curse of the Argonauts). From the start, then, we know that the human conflict obeys a larger design that escapes the control of its protagonists. But the gap never ceases to be perceived as such: what we feel all along to be more vivid, urgent and, in the final analysis, real is the interpersonal tragic conflict. Thus, we experience the two levels of causation as much in terms of discontinuity between the supernatural and the natural as in terms of continuity. This discontinuity we shall re-encounter in *The Spanish Tragedy*, where while Hieronimo's revenge is seen to be dictated from the upper-stage by Revenge, its realization below is felt to surpass anything Revenge could have anticipated. But the connection between the Kydian and the Senecan Chorus is not exhausted by this theatrical effect, which enhances the human (and therefore the psychological) dimension of revenge. The Chorus not only embodies the supernatural forces that shape the avenger's madness: it evolves in the play, and this evolution serves to mark the avenger's progression towards the crazed achievement of mental omnipotence Braden identified as the climax of *furor*. In order to appreciate these effects, however, it is necessary to realize that what the Elizabethan public dramatist found in Seneca were plays in which all elements are enactments, and not the static truths applauded by academics.

My contention is that the Chorus neither represents a Stoic stance towards the action of the play, nor contributes little to the development of the tragedy. On the contrary, it is an essential tragic device characterized by an evolving relationship with the action. This can be most interestingly illustrated in relation to *Thyestes*, the choral function of which has proved to be the most intractable to interpretation in Senecan criticism. Following Act I, in which Atrous lists his grievances against his brother and vows to wreak revenge on him, the Chorus enters rejoicing in the fact that "at last our noble house, the race of ancient Inachus, hath allayed the strife of brothers" (336-338); and for another seventy lines it exults at the

reconciliation.⁶ Plainly, the chronological disarray exposes Seneca to a charge of dramatic incompetence that has not passed unremarked in criticism. Indeed, various explanations have been offered to account for this most exceptional thing – “a deluded Chorus”, in Boyle’s phrase (1983: 50). For example, E.F. Watling observes in his well-known Penguin translation:

That the Chorus, here and again at 546, appear to be ignorant of Atreus’s treacherous intentions, is a considerable strain on the dramatic convention. Some suppose that the Chorus is absent from the stage between the acts. But no realistic solution need be looked for; the Chorus may participate as much, or as little, in the action as convenient; here they are assumed to be aware only of the ‘overt’ situation – the apparent reconciliation of the brothers. (1966: 60)

Having recommended that no “realistic” solution be sought, Watling offers a casually unconvincing one himself. Yet the Chorus does seem to vary in its degree of involvement in the action. Indeed, comparative readings reveal these variations to follow an identifiable pattern, which consists of a movement from an almost complete detachment from the tragic events to a total identification with them. The initial detachment usually comprises a vision of an idyllic, or at least non-tragic, reality, characterized by communal and religious harmony, and located in an organic world of vast open spaces. And so with the first Chorus:

If any god loves Achaian Argos and Pisa’s homes renowned for chariots; if any loves Corinthian Isthmus’ realm, its twin harbours, its dissevered sea; if any, the far-seen snows of Mount Taygetus, snows which, when in winter-time the Sarmantian blasts have laid them on the heights, the summer with its sail-filling Etesian breezes melts away; if any is moved by the cool, clear stream of Alpheus, famed for its Olympic course – let him his kindly godhead hither turn, let him forbid the recurrent waves of crime to come again, forbid that on his grandsire follow a worse grandson, and greater crime please lesser men. (122-135)

This initial anti-tragic vision, I would argue, does not constitute a “break in the dramatic recital” but represents an *alternative* stance to that which brings about the catastrophe. Far from a product of dramatic incompetence, the detached Chorus serves to intensify the tragic effect by defining the harmonious world out of which the

⁶ All citations of Seneca are to Miller (1953).

enacted play tears us. It allows us to perceive how the solipsistic disposition of the avenger will progressively swallow up any vision of normality. In this view, the Chorus fulfils a representational rather than chronological function. Thus, contrary to the received view, Senecan tragedy does not use the Chorus to moralize the action, but to anticipate by contrast the avenger's tragic conflation of self and universe, making us feel what it means to be possessed by self-assertive avenging *furor*. In sum, the Chorus serves a dramatic rather than doctrinal purpose. That its initial stance is the counterpart of the hero's stance is confirmed by the similar procedure that opens *Medea*, which sets Medea's opening curse on the marrying couple against their blessing by Chorus I. Indeed, there is little Stocism in the first Chorus's encouragement of the Corinthians to indulge in revelry and merrymaking.

The Senecan Chorus, however, is by no means confined to offering the audience or even the hero the alternative space of normality. From its initial "objective" stance it is sucked into its increasing concern with the tragic figure and its fate. Eventually it joins the action and takes part in the dialogue. That in most of the plays this happens only in Act IV is no accident. Generally a Senecan play – certainly the revenge plays – concludes with the engulfing of the luminous reality that the Chorus proclaimed by the infernal darkness of the avenger's mind. Once the Chorus has been sucked into the tragic nightmare, the everyday world ceases to withstand the tragic momentum. This descent from detachment to surrender is represented by the second and the third Choruses. Normally in Seneca the second Chorus can still be seen to counterbalance avenger's rage, as the "ignoring" Chorus in *Thyestes* shows. The third Chorus, however, invariably begins to mark the transition from commentary, even commentary addressed to the protagonist, to involvement. The sense of a universe ruled by impersonal, fixed laws has not yet been lost, but it is now affected by the impending horrors. Chorus III in *Medea* no longer rejoices in the communal festivities, but fears Medea's intentions and prays for the safety of Jason; while its counterpart in *Thyestes* fearfully admonishes Atreus to check his inordinate pride. This Choric evolution makes us feel how external reality is relentlessly made to yield to the growing force of the tragedy.

The final Chorus following Act IV offers something even more drastic: the collapse of the objective world. *Furor* has succeeded in engulfing the public world. Thus, in *Thyestes*, the fourth Chorus appears in dialogue with the Messenger, who is asked to describe

the horrors at which he is shuddering (639-640). The dialogue is followed by the Chorus's lament, which takes up and amplifies the drift of the Messenger's narrative, thus dissolving the final differences between enacted events and choric commentary, but thereby also removing the alternative reality to horrors. Vision has yielded to terror, description to feeling. In *Thyestes*, the Sun withdraws in revulsion at Atreus's crime, and the Chorus is overwhelmed by a nightmare of universal chaos:

Whatever this may be, would that night were here! Trembling, trembling are our hearts, sore smit with fear [the Latin enacts the very voice of eschatological despair: "*trepidant, trepidant pectora magno/ percussa metu*"], lest all things fall shattered in fatal ruin and once more gods and men be o'erwhelmed by formless chaos; lest the lands, the encircling sea, and the stars that wander in the spangled sky, nature blot out once more. (827-35)

The Chorus' final utterance is a cry against cosmic injustice; indeed of the disappearance of justice itself:

Have we of all mankind been deemed deserving that heaven, its poles uptorn, should overwhelm us? In our time has the last day come? Alas for us, by bitter fate begotten, to misery doomed, whether we have lost the sun or banished it! Away with lamentations, begone, O fear! Greedy indeed for life is he who would not die when the world is perishing in his company. (875-884)

Incapable of distinguishing between desert and misfortunes, between victimization and responsibility, it concludes by repudiating life itself. Whatever our identification with this view, however, we are left with something slightly different. Atreus's subjective dissolution of the cosmos leaves us, unlike the Chorus whose relationship with Atreus as a fellow *dramatis persona* is different from ours, with a vision of the horror of solipsism. Seneca's representation of mental omnipotence shows us that to attain it is to achieve solipsistic madness. This overwhelming climax could not have been achieved without the participation of an evolving Chorus.

As the previous analysis suggests, this striking use of the chorus depends on an *affective* Seneca that is utterly unlike the received Stoic platitudes of academic drama, or, indeed, Cunliffe's piecemeal Seneca. Despite the massive differences between the age of Nero and that of Elizabeth, what Elizabethan public dramatists responded to in their Roman ancestor was his overpowering

representation of vindictive madness, and they did not omit to notice the effective role the chorus plays in it.

3. The Elizabethan reception of the chorus: *The Spanish Tragedy*

Just how central the irrational element is to Hieronimo's revenge is confirmed by the appearance of Andrea with which the play concludes. Immediately after Hieronimo has massacred the entire court, Andrea comes forward to declare that the Destiny of Revenge has been accomplished. The ghost congratulates himself on the fulfilment of his expectations, taking stock of the destruction that he has wreaked among his fellow beings. His satisfaction is now complete. And this satisfaction does not appear to be qualified in the least by the fact his victims include his friends. On the contrary, Andrea numbers them amongst those whose deaths bring joy to him, and he exults at the blood that has engulfed the entire court. The greater the devastation, the greater his fulfilment. This seems indeed to be the Spirit of Revenge:

Ay, now my hopes have end in their effects,
When blood and sorrow finish my desires:
Horatio murdered in his father's bower,
Vile Serberine by Pedringano slain,
False Pedringano hanged by quaint device,
Fair Isabella by herself misdome,
Prince Balthazar by Bel-imperia stabbed,
The Duke of Castile and his wicked son
Both done to death by old Hieronimo,
My Bel-imperia fallen as Dido fell,
And good Hieronimo slain by himself:
Ay, these were spectacles to please my soul. (IV.v.1-12)⁷

To be sure, Andrea entreats Proserpine to permit that "I may consort my friends in pleasing sort,/ And on my foes work just and sharp revenge" (IV.iv.15-16). This may or may not be interpreted as an act of justice on his part – the punished "foes" include innocent Castile, for example – but the fact remains that this intention affects only the afterlife of the courtiers. As far as their enacted life is concerned, the outcome over which Andrea rejoices cannot be called "just" in any sense of the word. Indeed, this outcome seems to bring him joy because of, rather than in spite of, its random distribution of

⁷ All quotations from *The Spanish Tragedy* are taken from Mulryne (1989).

misfortune. Clearly, the “spectacles” that please Andrea’s soul are spectacles that satisfy an irrational desire for universal devastation, and thus include the deaths of Bel-imperia and Hieronimo as well as those of their villainous enemies. In so far as the upper-stage embodies the Spirit of Vengeance, this spirit seems to have little to do with punitive fairness.

That Andrea’s destructive desire is connected with Hieronimo’s is suggested by the fact that his “passion” appears to evolve in parallel with Hieronimo’s. Andrea’s bloody desire intensifies with the passage of time, keeping pace with the increasing grip of Revenge on Hieronimo. As Hallett and Hallett observe,

the desire [for vengeance] is simple but not static. It is worth noting that the Ghost’s passion is much like that of the revenger; it intensifies as the frustrations to its fulfilment increase. Initially, Andrea’s desire is almost unstated [...] at last he is imploring all the inhabitants of Hades to come and enforce his right [...] and though at first he viewed the methods of Revenge with dismay, at the end we find him delighting in the carnage. (1980: 142)

This evolving nature of the Chorus – “Here sit we down to see the mystery/And serve for Chorus in this tragedy” are Revenge’s directions at I.ii.90-91 – confirms its Senecan derivation. As shown above, the Senecan Chorus evolves with the action, so that the “objective” reality which it represents becomes, in the course of the action, swallowed up by the mental hell of *furor* the avenger inhabits. In *The Spanish Tragedy* the procedure is reversed, but to similar effect: the Chorus stands for the Spirit of Revenge; as such, it is counterpoised against the chivalric, anti-tragic court of Spain, which it eventually plunges into a bloodbath. That the Chorus is of Senecan derivation has long been recognized, but not until Barber has it emerged that its meaning is constructed *in contrast* to that of the civic world of the court.⁸

As opposed to the “valid social order in Spain” (1988:134), the upper-stage represents the irrational logic of violence: “the ghost of Andrea and Revenge are the representatives of a Senecan underworld from which they have come to watch its logic of vengeance assert itself in the upper world” (1988: 144). This Senecan

⁸ Until quite recently, the established view was that the chorus in *The Spanish Tragedy* served no purpose at all. Bowers, for example, in his famous study of revenge tragedy concluded that “Kyd was gradually led away from the Senecan construction so that his supernatural chorus became superfluous and even intrusive” (1959: 74).

violence breaks out through Hieronimo, whose heart responds more and more to the hell of Revenge, until it explodes into his bloody "show". Hence the connection that has been observed between Hieronimo's inner self and the upper-stage: "Kyd seems to share with his more orthodox contemporaries a conviction that the otherworld has an especially intimate relationship to the personal interior" (Maus 1995: 65). Kyd's certainly shares this conviction with his Christian contemporaries, but the form that expresses it in his play is classical in origin: in further proof of Senecan influence, the connection between inner self and upper-stage is emphasized by a Prologue. In Seneca, the Prologue embodies the psychic forces that overcome the hero in his vengeful madness. In *Thyestes*, for example, the Fury drags the ghost of Tantalus from the underworld in order to madden the house of Pelops, to which the ghost belongs – "Onward, damned shade, and goad thy sinful house to madness" (II.1-2). Accordingly, when Atreus becomes possessed by the madness of revenge, this is signalled by the infernalization of the *penetrable* in which he finds himself at that moment: the world of Tantalus, with its madness of revenge, becomes his own. Likewise, in the Prologue of *Hercules Furens*, Juno, enraged by unconquerable Hercules, promises to work his self-destruction through madness. In order to madden Hercules, however, she insists she must first madden herself, as if *she* were the insanity that will overcome her enemy: "That Alcides may be driven on, robbed of all sense, by mighty fury smitten, mine must be the fury first – Juno, why rav'st thou not?" This is the very world of supernatural essences we find in the upper-stage of *The Spanish Tragedy*. But in Kyd the temporal arrangement is rather more linear, as befits the providential universe of Christianity he inhabits. Kyd's Prologue establishes the connection between physic essence (Revenge) and the individual realization of it (Hieronimo) through the story of Andrea, of whom Horatio appears as the living counterpart. When Horatio is killed for his love of Bel-imperia, as Andrea was before him, Revenge takes over by taking possession of Hieronimo. This connection is visually reinforced by the memento of the handkerchief, which passes from Andrea to Horatio, and from Horatio to Hieronimo – like a transmitter of revenge energy.⁹

The fact that this connection is often remarked upon has not prevented the Chorus from being misconstrued as an emblematic

⁹ For an interesting analysis of the motive of the handkerchief and the relation between revenge and memory, see Kerrigan (1996).

device, and the play as an allegory in the native tradition. This is the result of downplaying Kyd's creative assimilation of Seneca. With his pioneering play, Kyd was making a deliberate attempt to expand the possibilities of Elizabethan dramaturgy. In the Senecan plays, he found a very effective device to generate the sense of an overwhelming tragic climax. In plays like *Medea* or *Thyestes*, he not only discovered the dramatic possibilities of *furor*, but also a powerful way of conveying its devastating triumph. This device was of course incorporated into a play and a culture that were far more complex than Seneca's. One would look in vain in the Roman plays for the brilliant ironies generated by the foreknowledge the Kydian Chorus affords to the audience. But in contrast to the alternative emblematic conception of the chorus, the affinity between Kyd and Seneca stands revealed.

It is not accidental that the author mostly responsible for this view of the play, G.K.Hunter, is such a fervent anti-Senecanist. In what is perhaps the most influential article on the play – "Ironies of Justice in *The Spanish Tragedy*" Hunter argues that it constitutes "an allegory of perfect justice." What Andrea demands and obtains from Revenge is "a parable of perfect recompense" (1978: 222). In other words, the play constitutes an expression of providential orthodoxy. In this view, the Chorus becomes a retributive mechanism guaranteeing the eventual triumph of justice. That the play ends with a human wreckage does not affect Hunter's verdict. For him, it is only our human finitude that impedes the acceptance of utter injustice as perfect justice. Providence may devour its own children, but Hunter would have us believe that it does so for the sake of justice. Whatever "justice" means here, it has ceased to have a human meaning. By severing the link between the Chorus and the interiority of the avenger Hunter is effectively depriving revenge of its subjective energy. For this reason, in his grim universe, the avenger "becomes the perfected instrument of Revenge only by becoming inhuman" (1978: 226). And the rest of the characters marionette-like figures – in *The Spanish Tragedy* "continuously we have had actors watching actors but being watched themselves still by other actors (watched by the audience) [...] and at each point in this chain what seems free will to the individual seems only a predetermined act to the onlookers" (1979: 227). There is no doubt that one of the most striking effects of the Chorus lies in the ironies it generates out of human limitation. But the effects of these ironies is not to annul the possibility of individual freedom. It is highly implausible that this should be the central vision to a Renaissance

play that won such acclaim for its innovativeness, that is to say, for looking to the future rather than to the medieval past. When Hunter claims that “[if the play] is seen not so much as the harbinger of *Hamlet* [...] but as the inheritor of a complex and rich tradition of moralizing dramaturgy, the actual structure of the play begins to make more sense” (1978: 216), he is being entirely consistent.

Contrary to Hunter’s Grand Guignol thesis, it seems to me that the Chorus is designed to create the opposite perception, to wit, that of distinctive individual agency. To be sure, with the presence of Andrea and Revenge Kyd achieves a multiple-perspective effect that puts the audience ahead of the characters, casting their actions in an ironic light. But the effect of the Chorus is more complex than that. The Chorus’s fierce vindictiveness co-exists with a playful, and even comic tone that cannot anticipate the ferocity of Hieronimo’s revenge. Barber, for example, refers to “these choruses, playful in a delightful way” (1988: 145). This playful tone is set by the Prologue, in which the underworld court of Pluto and Proserpine appears as frivolous as any earthly court can be –

Here finding Pluto with his Proserpine
I showed my passport, humbled on my knee,
Whereat fair Proserpine began to smile
And begged that only she might give my doom.
Pluto was pleased, and sealed it with a kiss. (I.i.76-80) –

and continues right through to the end of Act III, where Revenge falls asleep and Andrea is at pains to wake her up. Though Hunter’s conclusions seem to ignore this aspect of the Chorus, the fact remains that Kyd exploits our foreknowledge in order to make Hieronimo’s enactment of revenge even more shocking. The Chorus anticipates such an enactment, but its comic tone in no way prepares us for the carnage we witness. As a result, the sublunary plane of the humans gains rather than loses in prominence in relation to the plane of the eternal Substances. Contrary to the providential ethos of medieval derivation, the parallelism between the upper-stage and the main stage serves to highlight the self-consistency of the human world, which is perceived as the more intense and real world of the two. The importance of this deliberate mismatch for the meaning of the play is increasingly recognized. In the most updated survey of Kydian scholarship to appear, Lukas Erne, for example, quotes Joel B. Altman to the effect that “Kyd did create a frame that points in one direction and an action that points in another,” and concludes that “it is in this tension between frame and action that the play’s

fascination resides" (2001: 100). What has not been sufficiently emphasized is the Senecan derivation of such a crucial effect, which shows that Kyd read Roman drama in a much subtler and interesting way than most academics, past and present.

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