

# Senecan Drama and Its Influence on The Spanish Tragedy and The Revenger's Tragedy

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## Abstract

Senecan drama was not only a turning point in the development of Western tragic drama but also it has great impression upon the Elizabethans after the translation of Seneca into English between 1559 and 1581. Senecan tragedy strongly sympathizes blood-revenge for murder or flagrant injury, or else a serious revenge from motives of jealousy.

During a close reading of *The Spanish Tragedy* and *The Revenger's Tragedy*, it has been noticed that Thomas Kyd and Thomas Middleton/ Tourneur have been affected from Senecan drama. In *The Revenger's Tragedy* the protagonist, Vindice, achieves to take his revenge and in *The Spanish Tragedy* Hieronimo prepares a play to take his revenge. This article attempts to analyze the elements of Senecan drama used in *The Spanish Tragedy* and *The Revenger's Tragedy*.

**Key Words:** *Senecan Drama, blood, revenge, The Revenger's Tragedy, The Spanish Tragedy.*

## Özet

Seneca drama sı sadece Batı trajik drama sının gelişmesinde bir dönüm noktası değildir, aynı zamanda 1559 ve 1581 yılları arasında İngilizceye çevrildikten sonra Elizabethan lar üzerinde de büyük bir etkisi olmuştur. Seneca Trajedisi kuvvetli bir şekilde cinayet için kanlı öce ya da çirkin zararlara ya da kıskançlıktan dolayı ciddi ölçlere yakınlık duyar.

İspanyol Trajedisi (*The Spanish Tragedy*)ve Öç Trajedisi (*The Revenger's Tragedy*) dikkatlice okunduğunda Thomas Kyd'in ve Thomas Middleton yada Tourneur'ın Seneca Dramasından etkilendiği görülür. Öç Trajedisinde (*The Revenger's Tragedy*), kahraman Vindice, öcünü almayı başarır ve İspanyol Trajedisinde (*The Spanish Tragedy*), Hieronimo öcünü almak için bir oyun hazırlar. Bu makale, İspanyol trajedisindeki (*The Spanish Tragedy*) ve Öç trajedisindeki (*The Revenger's Tragedy*) Seneca dramasının unsurlarını incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır.

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“No author exercised a wider or deeper influence upon the Elizabethan mind upon the Elizabethan form of tragedy than did Seneca.” T.S.Eliot

Lucius Annaeus Seneca spent his life in the Rome of tyrants. Because of his success as an orator and a writer Emperor Caligula envied him and he almost met his death. Under Claudius he occupied a position at court and he was accused of an illicit intrigue with the princess Julia Livilla, niece of Claudius. Then he was called back to Rome and became the tutor of Nero for 8 years. Because of Nero's unpredictable behaviour he wanted to be retired. He left Rome and in the next 3 years he was interested in philosophy and his friends. In 65, he was implicated in the unsuccessful conspiracy of Piso and forced to commit suicide.

Senecan tragedy, an unprejudiced inspection, proves to possess many of the qualities that we still associate with the greatest drama: speakability; actability; powerful theatrical situations; conflict both between mind and within minds; and what we may describe... as an unrestricted symbolic use of the concrete universe for the abstract, which gives his text, rightly read, the immediate impact of nightmare.

(C.J. Herington, 1966, 57)

Seneca writes a different, introspective kind of drama which had a strong influence on Europe and England during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. His tragedies did not only affect Racine and Corneille but also Shakespeare and Webster who were fascinated by stoic virtues. Even though some scholars believe that Seneca wrote his tragedies not for performance it is not known whether his tragedies were performed on stage. Although he is different from his Greek predecessors he used Greek myth in *Hercules Furens*, *Agamemnon*, *Oedipus*, *Medea*, *Phaedra*, *Thyestes* and *The Trojan Women*. Seneca affirms that *it is characteristic of a great artist to have enclosed all things in a little place*. (Fredson Thayer Bowers, 1997, 41)

There are specific connections between Seneca's drama and his life. The moral conditions of his life and the moral significance of his dramatic exempla are inseparable. He witnessed and participated in the corrupting power, cruelty and hypocrisy in the court so vengeance, rape, lust, incest and savagery were the stuff of his life. Seneca dramatizes moral insights; human soul and human behaviour under moral stress. Furthermore his tragedy is derived from the Stoic, a conception of a rational moral order that is threatened by the human passions and a statesman's personal experience whose ideals were tortured by the moral savagery of his Rome. As a moral activist he was interested in models from real life and he used some mythological characters, well-known Roman worthies, to describe the evil world such as Mucius, Rutilius, Cato. According to T.S.Eliot Seneca restricts his

characters to show morality.

Seneca's prose style is an essentially declamatory style. He used a passionate tone, figurative language, and indirect methods of expressing meaning and moral epigrams in the speeches of the characters. He makes everything alive in the eyes of the audiences

The certain date of the first performance of *The Spanish Tragedy* is disputed but if the 1587 date is accepted it was possibly the first English tragedy to contain its own play-within-play. Kyd made a Senecan imitation and adapted *The Spanish Tragedy* to the popular stage. Thomas Kyd's play *The Spanish Tragedy* opens with the ghost of Don Andrea who wants justice for his unfair death by Don Balthazar in the Spanish – Portingale battle. Then Revenge gives a promise to Don Andrea to take his revenge. He seems like a character in the play; also the revenge theme is introduced by the ghost of Andrea as in the Senecan drama. As the play proceeds, the new causes of revenge emerge. Balthazar falls in love with Bel-Imperia and cooperates with Lorenzo to kill Horatio. After the death of Horatio we witness Hieronimo's revenge so revenge which is the main Senecan theme becomes the centre of the play. Revenge speaks and tells that something will happen in the play like the chorus in Senecan drama. While Balthazar and Lorenzo are in conflict with Horatio, and Bel-Imperia is in conflict with Balthazar, Hieronimo and Don Andrea do not only search for vengeance but also for one of the universal moral principles, justice. In addition to this, Hieronimo questions 'the Justice of Heavens' and tries to find the truth.

HIERONIMO: ...

Away, Hieronimo, to him be gone:

He'll do thee justice for Horatio's death.

Turn down this path, thou shalt be with him straight;

Or this, and then thou need'st not take thy breath.

This way or that way? Soft and fair, not so:

For if I hang or kill myself, let's know

Who will revenge Horatio's murder then?

...

(J.R. Mulryne-ed, 1970, Act III, scene XII, 12-17)

Seneca affirms that suicide must not be an escape from one's moral self, nor a passionate impulse, but meaningful and rational, like the suicide of Hieronimo whose suicide is a free act.

In several parts of the play Kyd uses quotations from Seneca directly and this is the most obvious marks of Senecan influence in Elizabethan and Jacobean tragedy.

VICEROY: ...

Qui jacet in terra, non habet unde cadat.

In me consumpsit vires fortuna nocendo,

Nil superest ut jam possit obesse magis.

(J.R. Mulryne-ed, 1970, Act I, scene III, 15-17)

“If one lies on the ground, one has no further to fall.

Towards me Fortune has exhausted her power to injure;

There is nothing further that can happen to me”

While *Kyd borrows the first line from Alanus de Insulis* he borrows the second line from *Agamemnon* directly. (J.R. Mulryne-ed, 1970) In the following lines Kyd personifies Fortune which is *blind and sees not deserts* like Seneca. Kyd also uses ironies in his play. For instance, when Bel – Imperia and Horatio meet, Horatio associates the invoking of the night to *sable wings*, the devil.

His language is also hyperbolic, the expressions, detailed descriptions, line for line dialogue and rhetorical language are some of the Senecan elements which are seen in Kyd's play. Like Seneca Kyd also makes long descriptions and visualizes everything in the eyes of the audiences. In the play there are two groups that live by different sets of values and the moral struggle is realized between Hieronimo, Bel – Imperia and Balthazar, Lorenzo.

The influence of Kydian formula is seen in *The Revenger's Tragedy*, a logical development from the medieval drama, with its dramatic structure and the theme of revenge. The play was published at the beginning of 1608, some copies bearing the date of 1607 and there was no author's name on the title-page not unusual for the period. It was probably written and performed in 1606, the previous year. Since the last decade of 19<sup>th</sup> century there has been debates among the scholars about the authorship of *The Revenger's Tragedy*. Various critics such as M.P. Jackson, David Lake and G.R. Price have carried on a range of detailed verbal, metrical, lexical and other stylistic analyses to determine the author of the play. In 1926 the first specific attempt to attribute it to Middleton instead of Tourneur was made by E.C.H. Oliphant who noted some resemblances such as phrasing, versification and vocabulary between *The Revenger's Tragedy* and Middleton's plays. On the other hand, M.C. Bradbrook observed that *The Revenger's Tragedy* is near kin to *The Atheist's Tragedy*, one of the plays of Tourneur so the author of the play is still unknown.

Senecan Tragedy confirmed the five-act structure and Middleton/Tourneur also used the five-act structure in *The Revenger's Tragedy*. The title of the play does not only refer to the revenge of Vindice but also the revenge of the Duchess, Spurio, Ambitioso, and Supervacuo against Lussurioso. Like Revenge in *The Spanish Tragedy*, Vindice whose lover was raped by Lussurioso, also waits to take his true revenge. Unlike Hieronimo, Vindice has several revenges to take; therefore Vindice does not concentrate in one action like Hieronimo but he hides his identity after he killed the Duke to preserve himself to take his other revenges. The play begins with the speech of Vindice who tells what will happen in the play.

VINDICE: ...

Vengeance, thou Murder's quit- rent, and whereby  
Thou show'st thyself tenant to Tragedy,  
Oh keep thy day, hour, minute, I beseech,  
For those thou hast determined. Hum, who e'er knew  
Murder unpaid, faith give Revenge her due  
She's kept touch hitherto – be merry, merry...

(Bryan Loughrey & Neil Taylor-ed, 1988, Act I, scene I, 39-44)

Senecan influence is seen in the ambitious speeches of *The Revenger's Tragedy*.

VINDICE

Oh you must note who 'tis should die –  
The duchess' son. She 'll look to be a savor:  
*Judgement in this age is near kin to favour.*

(Bryan Loughrey & Neil Taylor-ed, 1988, Act I, scene IV, 52-5)

SPURIO: ...

I'll loose my days upon him, hate all I!  
Duke on thy brow I'll draw my bastardy:  
For indeed a bastard by nature should make cuckolds  
Because he is the son of a cuckold master.

(Bryan Loughrey & Neil Taylor-ed, 1988, Act I, scene II, 199-202)

In the play under the Senecanism and literary satire, the Morality influence is seen. Vindice is seen in the light of a moral destroyer of a corrupt court. All the people in the court except Antonio have vices. While the Duchess, the Duke, Lussurioso, the younger son of the Duchess and Spurio are evil because of their lust, Ambitioso and Supervacuo are vicious because of their ambition.

In Senecan tragedy, the verbal violence (the cries of indignation against the inactivity of heaven) is also one of the most common characteristics. After Vindice managed to persuade his mother for the seduction of his sister he says;

Vindice: ...  
O more uncivil, more unnatural  
Than those base-titled creatures that look downward,  
Why does not heaven turn black, or with a frown  
Undo the world? Why does not earth start up  
And strike the sins that tread upon't? O,  
Were't not for gold and women, there would be no damnation,  
Hell would look like a lord's great kitchen without fire in't;  
But 'twas decreed before the world began  
That they should be the hooks to catch at man.

(Bryan Loughrey & Neil Taylor-ed, 1988, Act II, scene I, 246-54)

At the end of the Senecan plays (*Medea* and *Thyestes*) the revengers proclaim their satisfaction. For that reason Vindice's proclaimed at the end of the play is Senecan although he is punished for his vengeance. This is not Senecan because in *Medea* and *Thyestes* the revengers are not punished.

Vindice: ...  
We have enough, i'faith:  
We're well, our mother turn'd, our sister true;  
We die after a nest of dukes. Adieu.

(Bryan Loughrey & Neil Taylor-ed, 1988, Act V, scene III, 124-26)

As in the Senecan plays, in *The Spanish Tragedy* and *The Revenger's Tragedy* the dumb show is seen. Kyd uses the dumb show after the speeches of Revenge and the ghost of Andrea to signify that there will be something evil. Moreover, the dumb show which signifies the coming of evil events and thunder which represents the time of revenge are used in *The Revenger's Tragedy*. These plays conventionally made use of feigned or real madness in some of the characters and play within the play structures. Middleton/ Tourneur mixes blank verse, rhyme and prose within single speeches. In the language of the plays hyperbole of emotional and moral states which is one of the characteristic of Senecanism are seen. He also used figurative language and personification in his play.

Regenbogen elucidates that Seneca, in his portrayal of emotion and the pathos of pain and death, achieves a new conception of the tragic, a conception unlike the support of Greek tragedy. Because Seneca portrays all the horror of death to the last detail as Middleton/Tourneur and Kyd do. In *The Spanish Tragedy* all the time Revenge tells Andrea to wait and at the end of the play the horror of bloody deaths is realized. Vindice also comes near his revenge step by step so human pain and horror are set in a wider context.

The Senecan drama starts with a monologue or dialogue which either casts back to previous events or anticipates those to come. In *The Revenger's Tragedy* Vindice does not only explain the corruption and lechery in the court but also mentions that he will take his revenge at the beginning of the play. At the beginning of *The Spanish Tragedy* the ghost of Don Andrea also elucidates his unjust death and wants vengeance.

Like some scholars, W.C. Summers calls the Senecan dramas 'contemptible' because they are 'full of morbid craving for the horrible and disgusting'. They perceive Seneca as being hypocritical because of the characters in his drama such as a repulsive Medea, a ferocious Atreus. On the other side like Henry James, Seneca thinks of the world as an evil place that is full of injustices. Seneca creates evil characters as do Roman authors. Furthermore Seneca uses an ethical irony directed against vicious characters who seem to be successful in their aim and duty but actually who cannot manage anything. They are deranged, out of control and they do everything to be the winner but finally they are incapable of experiencing achievement although they appear to be successful in vice; Phaedra, Medea, Juno... In *The Spanish Tragedy* after Balthazar killed Don Andrea and Horatio he seems to achieve his aim, marrying Bel – Imperia. Lorenzo also kills Horatio and to cover his guilt he prepares the death of Pedringano and Serberine. After the death of the servants he thinks that he has no problem but with the ironic end of Kyd both of them suffer defeat. In *The Revenger's Tragedy* the younger son of the Duchess is tried and sentenced by the executioner. Spurio and Ambizioso want the death of Lussurioso to eliminate him as king. After Lussurioso is forgiven by the Duke they prepare a false letter to make his death quick. But they cannot realize their aim and cause the death of their own brother. At the end of the play they kill each other because of their ambition that is the disease of the mind to Seneca. Actually the main irony is seen in Lussurioso, a lustful man, who is killed by Vindice when he takes his first step to be a king so none of the characters who are successful in vice achieve their aims. On the other hand all Senecan protagonists transform into an evil character, a tyrant at the end of the plays like Vindice and Hippolito and Hieronimo.

The visual violence is also one of the elements of Senecan tragedy. In *The Spanish Tragedy* the 'spectacle' of Horatio's dead body reveals alongside the four corpses. In *The Revenger's Tragedy* the Duke's death and the death banquet at the end of the both plays are instances for the visual violence.

The paradox of adversity is also another aspect of the Stoicism which is used to shock the reader and to capture the attention of the audience. Although Hieronimo and Vindice are good men misfortune befalls them. While Hieronimo suffers because of the unjust death of Horatio, his son, Vindice suffers because of the death of his wife so as the Stoics believe learn through suffering.

'What bombast is also often linked to is the 'self-dramatisation', informing the speech of so many Renaissance dramatic figures, and heralded by Eliot as one of Seneca's greatest legacies to Elizabethan tragedy.' (161, Norman Twombly Pratt) So the onomastic rhetoric derives from Senecan tragedy and the characters successfully play with and upon their names. In *The Revenger's Tragedy* and *The Spanish Tragedy* we see the protagonist's concern to rhetoricise their name.

Hieronimo: ...

No, princess; know I am Hieronimo,  
The hopeless father of a hapless son,  
Whose tongue is tuned to tell his latest tale,  
Not to excuse gross errors in the play.

...

(J.R. Mulryne-ed, 1970, Act IV, scene IV, 83-86)

Vindice: Tis I, 'tis Vindice, 'tis I.

(Bryan Loughrey & Neil Taylor-ed, 1988, Act III, scene V, 165)

In the early Republic, a Roman woman had few rights as a mother and a matron. A Roman woman's father decided marriage arrangements instead of the daughter, gave her dowry which passed to the Possession of her husband. Then women began to be remarkable at Rome for their flirtations and adulteries. Seneca used these vices in women as a theme in his dramas and he condemned feminine luxury and lust. According to Seneca women are created to be pacific and receptive; also he elucidates that a woman is chaste when she herself has elected to be so. In *The Spanish Tragedy* Kyd also shows us the position of a woman, Bel – Imperia, and the patriarchal society.



KING

Brother of Castile, to the prince's love  
What says your daughter Bel – Imperia?

CASTILE

Although she coy it as becomes her kind,  
And yet dissemble that she loves the prince,  
I doubt not, I, but she will stoop in time.  
And were she forward, which she will not be,  
Yet herein shall she follow my advice,  
Which is to love him or forgo my love.

(J.R. Mulryne-ed, 1970, Act II, scene III, 1-8)

So eventhough Bel – Imperia does not want to marry Balthazar she has to obey the rules of her father. As Seneca showed in Lucretia, Cloelia and Helvia, Kyd also shows woman courage and heroism in Bel – Imperia when she kills Balthazar and herself at the end of the play. While Middleton celebrates woman's chastity with the characters of Castiza and Antonio's wife he condemns woman's lust using the Duchess. In the play Castiza does not accept a sexual relationship with Lussurioso although her brother, Vindice, and her mother try to persuade her. She is approved with these words;

VINDICE

(Aside) Oh angels clap your wings upon the skies  
And give this virgin crystal plaudities!

(Bryan Loughrey & Neil Taylor-ed,1988, Act II, scene I, 242-43)

Moreover committing suicide for chastity is called an honorable act by Middleton/ Tourneur when the wife of Antonio commits it after she was raped by the younger son of the Duchess. Her act is approved by her husband and the other nobles.

PIERO

That virtuous lady!

ANTONIO

Precedent for wives!

HIPPOLITO

The blush of many women, whose chaste presence

Would e'en call shame to their cheeks  
And make pale wanton sinners have good colours –  
ANTONIO  
Dead!  
Her honour first drank poison, and her life,  
Being fellows in one house, did pledge her honour.

(Bryan Loughrey & Neil Taylor-ed,1988, Act I, scene IV, 6-13)

Seneca who has one of the most influential intellectual and literary men shaped the development of the tragic drama in Renaissance Europe. He affected many writers and intellectuals with his rhetorical language, dramatic characters and the way of telling the feelings of his characters. In *The Spanish Tragedy* and *The Revenger's Tragedy* his influence and effect are also seen and the ideas of Seneca and his skillful use of words are still important today.

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