

## THE INFLUENCE OF SENECA TRAGEDY ON *HAMLET*

### *SENECA TRAJEDİLERİNİN HAMLET'E ETKİSİ*

Research Asst. Zafer ŞAFAK

Iğdır University Faculty of Science and Letters Department of Western languages And Literatures

#### **Abstract**

*Hamlet*, which is one of the masterpieces of William Shakespeare, narrates the tragedy of the Prince of Denmark whose father is killed by his uncle and his rightful ascension to throne is prevented by his uncle's unjust marriage to his mother. After speaking with his father's ghost, *Hamlet*, who oscillates incessantly from action to contemplation, becomes a model of hesitation. By portraying the titular character with a profound intellectual agility and emotional depth, and by focusing on such internal elements in his work as obsession with crime, incest, expository soliloquies and eloquence in speech, Shakespeare, who is a Renaissance man and whose works are accepted to have been formed with the effect of the re-reading of the ancient works, draws near to Senecan tragedies instead of Aristotle's principles defined in *Poetics*. *Hamlet's* proximity to Senecan tragedies can be observed both in thematic and stylistic domains. Almost all the internal principles such as the span allotted to tragedy, error of judgment and recognition set by Aristotle, either lacks in *Hamlet* or does not suit Aristotelian notions. The objective of this study is to prove that *Hamlet*, which is a deep examination of the human soul with dramatic excitement, is written under the effect of Senecan tragedies instead of Aristotelian principles set forth in *Poetics*.

**Key Words:** *Hamlet*, Senecan Tragedies, Poetics, Human Soul, Aristotle

#### **Özet**

William Shakespeare'in başyapıtlarından biri olan *Hamlet*, babası amcası tarafından öldürülen ve tahta çıkışı amcasının annesiyle evlenmesiyle engellenen Danimarka Prensinin trajedisini anlatmaktadır. Babasının hayaletiyle konuştuktan sonra sürekli eylemle tasarlama, düşünme arasında bocalayan *Hamlet*, tereddütlü bir modeli haline gelir. Eserin ismiyle aynı adı taşıyan karakteri büyük bir zihinsel çeviklik ve duygusal derinlikle çizen ve eserinde suça takıntı, ensest, kendi kendine yapılan konuşmalar ve konuşmada belagat gibi iç unsurlara odaklanan, eserlerinin antik eserlerin yeniden okunmasıyla oluşturulduğu kabul edilen Rönesans insanı Shakespeare, *Poetika* da tanımlanan Aristo prensiplerinin yerine Seneca trajedilerine yaklaşır. *Hamlet*'in Seneca trajedilerine yakınlığı hem tematik hem de biçimsel alanda

gözlenebilir. Aristo tarafından saptanan trajediye ayrılan süre, karar verme yanlışlığı, farkına varma gibi iç unsurlar ya *Hamlet*'te yoktur ya da bunlar Aristo'nun görüşlerine uymamaktadır. Bu çalışmanın amacı, dramatik zevkle insan ruhunun derin bir incelemesi olan *Hamlet* 'in *Poetika* da ileri sürülen Aristo prensiplerinin yerine Seneca trajedilerinin etkisi altında yazıldığını ispatlamaktır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Hamlet, Seneca Trajedileri, Poetika, İnsan Ruhu, Aristo

## 1. Introduction

Senecan tragedies heavily depend on language since the plays are not acted (Lucas 2009, 57) and to fill the gap of “deficiency” of not having action on the stage, Senecan tragedies employ rhetorical devices, detailed descriptions, hyperboles, aphorisms, epigrams, abundant maxims and sententious utterances; in the words of Frank Lucas “the whole burden is thrown upon the language” (Lucas 2009, 57). The same tendency is shared by English playwrights including Christopher Marlowe, Thomas Kyd and William Shakespeare. The reason why English stage is affected by Senecan tragedies is its profound dependence on language and affiliation with figures of speech. It is argued that:

*But here also was a source of its influence on a Tudor England just realising of what oratorical magnificence its own English tongue was capable, an England intellectually young and therefore delighting in truth thrown about like squibs, an England, too, intellectually raw and crude and therefore loving the lurid extravagances of Senecan bombast and flamboyance* (Lucas 2009, 57).

Initial effects of Senecan tragedies in English stage are seen in the second half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century which later influenced the plays of Shakespeare. It is reported that “In 1579 was produced at Cambridge a Senecan tragedy on Richard III, by Legge, the Master of Caius, which influenced The True Tragedie of Richard III, which in its turn affected Shakespeare's play, one of his most Senecan” (Lucas 2009, 97). It is apparent that the influence of Senecan tragedies can be observed well before Shakespeare has launched his literary career. Although it is evident that English playwrights, particularly those who excelled in tragedy, are affected by Seneca's plays, it is hard to trace its clues in these plays since the Renaissance playwrights of the time are engaged more with ancient Greek sources and especially with Aristotle and his *Poetics* since he is accepted as an authority in the art of writing.

The aim of this paper is to demonstrate that *Hamlet* falls under the general framework and notions of Senecan tragedy rather than Aristotle's principles of tragedy whose rules and borders are defined and drawn in *Poetics*. It is aimed to distinguish *Hamlet* as a play written under the impact of Senecan tragedies by referring the notions adopted by Seneca and contrasting *Hamlet*'s dramatic features with the rules put forward by Aristotle in *Poetics*.

## 2. Indications of the Impact of Senecan Tragedies on *Hamlet*

Elizabethan dramatists remained under profound influence of tragedies written by Seneca. Although Seneca's nine tragedies are commonly reputed to be written for the purpose of recitation rather than performance, Elizabethan playwrights accepted them as stage plays (Lucas 2009, 56-57). Seneca's impact on dramatists of the age can be observed with such playwrights, as Marlowe, Webster and Kyd. Shakespeare, particularly through *Hamlet*, is not an exception. Thomas Nashe remarks on the subject as follows:

*Yet English Seneca read by candle light yeeldes manie good sentences, as Bloud is a beggar, and so forth; and, if you intreate him faire in a frostie morning, he will affoord you whole Hamlets, I should say handfulls of tragicall speaches. But O grieve! tempus edax rerum, what's that will last alwaies? The sea exhaled by droppes will in continance be drie, and Seneca led bloud line by line and page by page at length must needes die to our stage (Bushnell 2005, 298).*

In terms of thematic features, what Shakespeare borrows from Seneca is the revenge; a revenge out of a great wrong and injustice done against a major character. In view of stylistic features, what Seneca gives Shakespeare is line-for-line dialogues known as stichomythia, soliloquy and meditative nature of characters.

*It was through Seneca's work that elements such as blood and violence, grand rhetorical speeches, and the appearance of ghosts would become part of staged productions, such as is seen in Shakespeare (Hacht, M. Anne 2007, 782).*

As it is referred above, the theme of revenge is a significant thematic element in the Elizabethan drama convention, which is also inherited from Seneca's plays. This theme of revenge is usually introduced by the ghost of a wronged person just as in the case of Hamlet's father who is obliged to wander in purgatory and hand over the revenge upon the shoulders of Hamlet. Introduction of the revenge by a ghost is not a discovery of Shakespeare; rather it is a theatrical convention coming from Seneca.

*While the ghost of Hamlet's father derives from the ghosts in Seneca's Agamemnon and Thyestes, unlike them, Hamlet's father modifies the call for revenge; 'nor let thy soul contrive / Against thy mother ought'. Again, Hamlet's famous meditative soliloquy 'To be or not to be' derives from a choral ode in Seneca's The Trojan Women lines 371-81 (Miola 1992, 29-44).*

The fact that this revelation is brought by the agency of a ghost seems to be a contrast with the precepts regarding the "proper" tragedy defined by Aristotle in his *Poetics*. Aristotle is against any kind of supernatural being which can jeopardize the plot's necessity and probability:

*As in the structure of the plot, so too in the portraiture of character, the poet should always aim either at the necessary or the probable. Thus a person of a given character should speak or act in a given way, by the rule either of necessity or of probability; just as this event should follow that by necessary or probable sequence [...] the plot*

*itself, it must not be brought by the "Deus ex Machina [...]" Within the action there must be nothing irrational (Butcher 2000, 21).*

This premise set forth by Aristotle in his *Poetics* makes it hard for the classification of *Hamlet* as a play written in tune with the precepts of *Poetics*.

It is beneficial to maintain the argument in expounding on the internal elements that must be found in tragedy. According to Aristotle, a tragic hero must be a man who moves from prosperity to ruin out of an error of judgement. It must arise from either ignorance or some kind of moral defect (Butcher 2000, 35). In the case of the play *Oedipus*, which is an archetype of tragedy and one of the prime models for Aristotle to exemplify the rules of tragedy, primary character kills his father and marries his mother out of ignorance and his situation and the play itself can be credited with bearing Aristotelian notions. But it is not valid in the case of *Hamlet*. What falls on Hamlet's lot in this life is neither out of his moral shortcoming nor because of his ignorance of any kind vital and tragic. He is wronged by a lusty uncle who killed his father, married his mother and usurped his right to ascend to the throne. It can be argued that misfortune, which befalls on Hamlet, is not out of ignorance but because of his ill fate. This fatalistic feature may pass on Shakespeare through the fatalistic perception of Seneca who was a stoic as well. In his work, Lucas points out the stoical identity of Seneca as well as stressing the hardships of becoming a poet and being a stoic at the same time.

*But its considerable truth emphasizes the difficulty of a Stoic Seneca becoming a real poet, above all a dramatic one. There must always be an antipathy between the poetic and the philosophic mind. It is ill enough when philosophers gird at poetry: but when they try to write it! The Stoic then had banned emotion; and when he wants to stage it, he can only produce hysteria (Lucas 2009, 60).*

Seneca's stoicism, which envisages fatalism, man's weakness and his inability to confront the fate with its inevitable consequences, surfaces not only in *Hamlet* but also in other plays of the playwright. Scholars pointed out this fact in their works when concentrating on Seneca's effect on Elizabethan theatre and Shakespeare. "For a long time it has been usual for English critics to blame Seneca for anything which they have not liked in Elizabethan Drama" (Beckingham 1937, 434).

In *Hamlet*, fatalism runs throughout the play; for instance, Polonius is killed while he is eavesdropping Hamlet's conversation with his mother, and Ophelia who is innocent except the quilt of requiting Hamlet's love and goes mad, and she consequently dies or commits suicide because of Hamlet's indifference to her. In addition to these incidents, Seneca's influence of fatalism is felt by the speeches of characters:

*Hamlet, who has just said to Horatio, 'But thou wouldst not think how ill all's here about my heart', tries to prepare himself for his duel with Laertes by considering that 'There's a special providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be now, 'tis not to come; if it be not to come, it will be now; if it be not now, yet it will come: the readiness is all' (Beckingham 1937, 437).*

Other features posited in *Poetics* in relation to the elements of the tragedy are peripetia and anagnorisis. Peripetia means sudden change which moves tragic character from prosperity to ruin and anagnorisis is the moment of recognition of some truth when tragic hero's ignorance gives way to knowledge. Aristotle puts forward that it is best for a tragedy when peripetia and anagnorisis coincide:

*Reversal of the Situation is a change by which the action veers round to its opposite, subject always to our rule of probability or necessity [...] Recognition, as the name indicates, is a change from ignorance to knowledge, producing love or hate between the persons destined by the poet for good or bad fortune. The best form of recognition is coincident with a Reversal of the Situation (Butcher 2000, 16).*

While Oedipus tragedy perfectly overlaps with Aristotle's notions of tragedy, in *Hamlet*, audience cannot observe a "sudden change" which leads Hamlet from prosperity to ruin. From the beginning to the end, everything occurs gradually and there is no messenger, as in the case of Oedipus, who informs the tragic hero and leads him into his inevitable doom. As for anagnorisis, though there is recognition of some kind of a hidden and malevolent action, it cannot be accepted as a recognition in the sense Aristotle crystallizes it. If anagnorisis is assumed to have taken place in the castle Elsinore, it should be born in mind that Hamlet does not actively participate in the recognition of the horrible murder of his father as the ghost of his father just reveals the cause of his death to Hamlet. What's more, anagnorisis -even if it were accepted as recognition in its own right- cannot fully fit the Aristotelian precepts as it occurs just at the beginning of the play instead of to the end of the play.

When the span or time allotted to tragedy is considered, Aristotle urges that a play must be limited to a day or a little more. "[...] for Tragedy endeavors, as far as possible, to confine itself to a single revolution of the sun, or but slightly to exceed this limit" (Butcher 2000, 9). When one considers Shakespeare's *Hamlet* in terms of the span allotted to it, s/he immediately recognizes that *Hamlet* is too extended for Aristotle's notion of tragedy. Not only does *Hamlet* "transgress" the boundaries of internal elements of tragedy in *Poetics*, but also it is larger for the structure of the tragedy proposed by Aristotle.

Aristotle emphasizes that tragedy is an imitation of an action but not of men (Butcher 2000, 11). His emphasis falls on action that the tragedy must narrate its cause with its incidents rather than heavily depending on speeches.

*For Tragedy is an imitation, not of men, but of an action and of life, and life consists in action, and its end is a mode of action, not a quality [...] If you string together a set of speeches expressive of character, and well finished in point of diction and thought, you will not produce the essential tragic effect (Butcher 2000, 11).*

On the contrary, Senecan tragedy employs rhetorical devices, detailed descriptions, hyperboles, aphorisms and it utilizes "far-fetched epigrams" (Lucas 2009, 55). Instead of fitting the principles of Aristotelian tragedy, a tragic character like Hamlet, a speculative genius, who constantly meditates on life, death, women, futility

of man's action against the uncertainties of life, can only be fully rendered in a way much proper to Senecan tragedy rules, which proposes self-dramatization, abundant maxims sententious utterances and a "language violently rhetorical" (Lucas 2009, 57). Hamlet relates his thoughts by means of heavily depending on puns and double-entendres. When Hamlet is asked like a mad man by Polonius about who he is, he just retorts "You are a fishmonger" (Shakespeare 1998: 69). Fishmonger is not only someone who sells fish but a pimp; Hamlet accuses indirectly Polonius as he "uses" his daughter to reveal the nature of the madness or secret of Hamlet. Hamlet uses puns which are heavily sexually embroidered run through the work. He verbally attacks on Ophelia as she let others use her to their own cause. Hamlet says, "Get thee to a nunnery" (Shakespeare 1998, 101). Hamlet means both "keep yourself in a convent to be away from this sinful, dangerous world" and "go into a brothel as you are being used by Claudius and Polonius."

The fact that Senecan plays were aimed to be recited rather than acted seems to have substituted the dramatic impact with rhetorical devices.

*Since the play is not acted, it tends to have less and less action, and the whole burden is thrown upon the language. Seneca's audience was steeped in rhetoric and in the Augustan poets. Therefore that language had to be violently rhetorical, whether in set speeches, or in cut-and thrust stichomythia and it had to be variegated with purple patches of description and allusion to those Augustans in the super-fine poetic style (Lucas 2009, 57).*

Although *Hamlet* was written to be acted on the stage, the play inherits abundant resemblances to its Senecan predecessors with regard to eloquence in speech and expository soliloquies. Hamlet's expository soliloquies, one of which is the most recited and the most famous is the "To be or not to be" (Shakespeare 1998, 97). It seems to be contrasting with Aristotle's notion of action in tragedy because Hamlet in this soliloquy mediates on the difficulties of being alive, fear of death and what the hereafter hold for human being. Hamlet, by means of expressive soliloquies, violates Aristotle's indictment of true tragedy and falls prey -like some plays- not to be able to produce "the tragic effect" by heavily depending on speech in the portraiture of character. "if you string together a set of speeches expressive of character, and well finished in point of diction and thought, you will not produce the essential tragic effect [...]" (Butcher 2000, 11). It would have been inaccurate to conceive Hamlet is devoid of any action and only a man of words then put forward that the character violates the rules of tragedy in *Poetics*; but, one should not miss the point that Hamlet's contemplative quality is the very essence what enables the play develop and evolve into a tragic form. Even Hamlet is aware of the reality of his meticulousness in excessive thinking and he confesses it while he is retorting with his old school friend Rosencrantz: "Why, then, 'tis none to you; for there is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so: to me it is a prison" (Shakespeare 1998, 73). The other incident which Hamlet reveals that even he himself is aware of his excessive contemplative quality is in the act 4 scene 4. While Fortinbras crosses, he learns that people will be

crushed for trivial piece of land in Poland and says "The imminent death of twenty thousand men, That for a fantasy and trick of fame" (Shakespeare 1998, 159). Upon this incident, he thinks the magnitude of his duty and berates himself "When honor's at the stake. How stand I then, That have a father kill'd, a mother stain'd" and stimulates himself into action by saying "To hide the slain? O, from this time forth, My thoughts be bloody, or be nothing worth!" (Shakespeare 1998, 159).

If Hamlet had been a tragic character in conventional sense, much like in the Greek and Roman tragedies, he would have had to kill Claudius in the first opportunity as the tragic characters, peculiar to ancient tradition, should act out of ignorance and undue haste. But instead he contemplates that:

*Now might I do it pat, now 'a is a praying; And now I'll do't and so 'a goes to heaven, And so am I reveng'd. That would be scann'd: A villain kills my father, and for that I, his sole son, do this same villain send To heaven* (Shakespeare 1998, 129).

It is apparent that contemplative quality of Hamlet is the fabric on which the play is structured and it is the very thing what makes the play and character different from the rest of the tragic plays.

In *Poetics*, Aristotle defines the tragedy and he puts forward that tragedy must be whole which requires a beginning, middle and an end. Aristotle asserts that in a well-structured tragedy, poet should not start in the middle of an action at some point when a great number of things have already happened. "A well-constructed plot, therefore, must neither begin nor end at haphazard, but conform to these principles" (Butcher 2000, 12).

Aristotle obviously challenges to the common method of beginning a story "in the middle of things" which is known as "in medias res" and it is particularly valid for epic tradition. When one analyzes the above mentioned hypothesis by Aristotle for a well-structured tragedy and applies it to *Hamlet*, s/he immediately recognizes that *Hamlet* falls short in fulfilling Aristotle's precepts as the play opens abruptly on the battlements of the castle Elsinore in Denmark where a good deal of things have already taken place, which have driven Hamlet to the edges of fake madness and the borders of actual tragic hero.

Seneca's impact on *Hamlet* can be proven not only how much it is far from the a priori set rules by Aristotle but also how much *Hamlet* is close to Senecan drama on thematic level. Themes which are dealt by Seneca can be summarized as follows:

*[...] the theme of his writings, prose or verse, exile, murder, incest, the threat of poverty and a hideous death, and all the savagery of fortune were of the very texture of his career. Such themes, at least where Seneca is concerned [...]* (Herrington 1966, 430).

First of all, there is an obsession with crimes: Assassination of Hamlet's father, murder of Polonius and Hamlet's adept engineering of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's execution, Laertes and Hamlet's fencing which leads not only to the

death of the both characters but also the murder of Gertrude and Claudius all of which remind the dire atmosphere of Seneca's plays.

Preoccupation with incest is another feature which culminates in Hamlet. Hamlet loathes the very fact that his mother married his uncle and betrayed the legacy of King Hamlet. "You are the Queen, your husband's brother's wife, And would it were not so, you are my mother" (Shakespeare 1998, 131).

Other Senecan peculiarity shared by *Hamlet* is the introduction of a ghost in to the play who calls for revenge and causes self-dramatizations of the tragic hero. While Lucas argues that "Of *Hamlet* indeed one may say that the ghost is of the true Senecan type" (Lucas 2009, 123), Gregory Staley draws attention to a different perspective that "Seneca's plays are filled with hellish monsters, it is at least plausible that he might have seen them as frightening warnings of the baneful power of passion" (Staley 2009, 80). In this point, the ghost of Hamlet is claimed to be an ominous creature that haunts primary character who is already tormented between the anguish and disgust due to his mother's illicit relationship with his uncle and prevention of his rightful ascension to the throne. Critics, who have questioned the authority and particularly the authenticity of the ghost, have suspected its legitimacy in terms of Christian faith. Some put forward that "If conceived of from a Catholic perspective, the Ghost is a tormented spirit from purgatory, which is a Catholic concept. From a Protestant perspective, the Ghost must be a demon from hell" (Hacht 2007, 210). From the psychoanalytic angle, the ghost can also be interpreted as Hamlet's release of repressed impulses and the apparition is the reflection for his desires to be justified. Freudian reading of *Hamlet* in relation to the existence of the ghost will reveal that Hamlet's conversation with the ghost is the "sick man's dream" (quoted in Staley 2009, 102). Freud read ancient playwrights and their works such as Sophocles and his *Oedipus* while writing his work *Interpretation of Dreams* and Seneca and his plays were not exception. Staley argues that "For Freud, as for Seneca, to explore the soul is to visit the underworld and to confront the monsters who reside there. That is why both "psychologists" read Vergil" (Staley 2009, 102). Whether the ghost of Hamlet is baleful creature subjected to torment in hell, purgatory or the authentic reporter of Hamlet's ill-fate, it is apparent that the apparition is not Shakespeare's invention but the legacy of Senecan plays.

Seneca's effect on *Hamlet* is not only observed through elements such as an obsession with crime, a preoccupation with incest, a ghost that calls for revenge and self-dramatization of the hero but also one can see Seneca's influence on *Hamlet* when Shakespeare –in *Hamlet*– acknowledges the superiority of Seneca along with Plautus who excelled in every type of drama in order to meet the demands of the audience and readers alike.

*"[...] either for tragedy, comedy, history, pastoral, pastoral-comical, historical-pastoral, tragical-historical, tragical –comical historical- pastoral, scene individable, or poem unlimited; Seneca cannot be too heavy, nor Plautus too light, for the law of writ and the liberty: these are the only men"* (Shakespeare 1998, 79).



In this point, Shakespeare who pays tribute to his predecessor in his play by making Polonius his spokesperson, makes an outright reference to Seneca and reserves a paramount place for his predecessor in drama by stating that they “are the only men” in the art of drama.

### 3. A Modest Value of Judgement

All in all, it can be urged that Seneca’s effect on *Hamlet* is all-pervasive through thematic and stylistic features. One scholar goes further in expressing his thoughts that one cannot fully apprehend *Hamlet* without Seneca: “Seneca is undoubtedly one of the effective ingredients in the emotional charge of *Hamlet*. *Hamlet* without Seneca is inconceivable” (Doran 1954, 16).

Others point out the premise that Shakespeare’s plays not only would have been “unconceivable” without Seneca, but also they would not have even existed. “The tragedies of Shakespeare (1564–1616) would in many ways not have been possible without Seneca” (Staley 2010, 19).

Some other scholars set forth that as dramatic art “was killed with culture” in other countries, England was a suitable place for Senecan tragedies to flourish.

*[...] it was in England, the most distant and latest field, which the seed of Senecan tragedy came soonest to harvest: and only later were Racine in France, Alfieri in Italy to produce a type of tragedy even nearer the Senecan original. The reason is not far to seek. In Italy and France dramatic art was, for the present, killed with culture* (Lucas 2009, 92).

One can claim that in such an available atmosphere, it is natural for tragedies of Shakespeare to be associated with Senecan tragedies.

Above all else, when the assertions about *Hamlet*’s incongruity with Aristotle’s directives in *Poetics*, which are thoroughly elaborated above, are examined and when the thematic correspondence of Shakespearean tragedies with that of Seneca’s are taken into consideration, it can be ultimately logical to put forward that *Hamlet*, as a tragedy of Shakespeare, should be aligned with Senecan tragedies rather than placing it in line with Aristotelian theoretical notions of tragedy and plays.

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