

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Frederic Will, Ph.D.

Seneca (4 B.C.-65 A.D.)

Seneca and Plautus. At the conclusion of this week's syllabus you will find a translation of a passage from Seneca's *Oedipus*—exact date unknown—which may at first glance make you doubt whether we are still dealing with Ancient Roman drama. We are. Though the passage yanks its original into strong contemporary diction it is nonetheless a vigorous and honest account of lines from the Roman dramatist and philosopher Seneca. We could hardly be farther in spirit from the comic world of Plautus, which we read in the previous week. We have moved two hundred years into the future, have entered the first half-century of Imperial Roman rule, and have changed genre from robust stock character drama to closet drama playing off against a sophisticated model, the *Oedipus* of the Greek dramatist Sophocles, written in the mid fifth century B.C.

Oedipus the King. Sophocles' play, as you know, concerns a proud, doomed, and irascible Ruler of Thebes, whose land has gone waste as a result—that is the rumor in the kingdom—of unholy actions somewhere in the community. The drive of the tightly compacted play is to find out the cause of the plague on the land, to track it to its individual source—the King himself—and to mete out a dreadful purging punishment to the King. The play is a perfect geometry of beginning, middle, end. Seneca's *Oedipus*, on the other hand, is baroque, digressive, highly rhetorical. Whereas the king's mother, Jocasta, is in Sophocles a cog in the wheels of destiny, who limits her commentaries, on the dreadful fate of her son, to various ways of deploring the savage ironies of life, in Seneca's play, as you see above, Jocasta deplores, in the fate of her son, the whole rotten fallenness of the human condition, and does so in extravagantly bitter and melodramatic terms. In the hands of her brilliant British adapter, Ted Hughes, her speech acquires a texture of its own, which brings to the front of the play the hyperbolic intensity of a character who, in Sophocles, is simply a stage in the development of the plot.

The tenor of Seneca's work. The tenor of Seneca's work as a dramatist is epitomized in this example: intense, hyperbolic, rhetorical, and, as we refreshingly begin to think, valuable in its own right and deeply expressive of its own age. (Think of the example of the murder of Agrippina, in Tacitus; think of the fierce personal struggles, and emotional depths, of the main figures in the fight for the succession to Augustus, at just the time of Seneca's life: doesn't the speech of Jocasta belong to the rhetorical modes of the time?)

Seneca and Nero. The dramatist behind *Oedipus*, and eight other tragedies on ancient Greek mythical themes, played a prominent role in the first half of the first century A.D. From Cordoba in Spain, Seneca went as a young man to Rome, to study Rhetoric and Philosophy—in the latter field especially to deepen his understanding of the principles of Stoicism, to which he adhered throughout his life. That Greek philosophy, with its emphasis on control of the passions, but also on the power of the emotions, lay behind the philosophical developments of Seneca's thought. His view was that the misuse of the passions is a sure key to downfall, and that man needs calm and willed self-discipline in order to lead a satisfactory life. This larger perspective, which is deeply embedded in the values of Seneca's literary work, was hard won, for in 'real life' Seneca himself was exposed to the baroque energies of a cultural moment which would not spare the individual. As tutor and advisor to the Emperor Nero—again recall the treatment of Nero in Tacitus—Seneca tried to convince his boss of the importance of self-control, and for a time, but only for a time, succeeded.

Seneca as moralist. In the year 41 A.D. Seneca was accused of complicity in a plot to kill the Emperor, and was sent into exile. It was while in exile on the island of Corsica that Seneca turned inward and began to write seriously, leaving us in the end a remarkably rich collage of texts—one hundred twenty four letters—many of them highly refined philosophical reflection, nine tragedies, and twelve substantial philosophical essays, in which he discusses, with great finesse, issues bearing on desire, anger, and the potentials for global oneness in humanity. It is cruelly ironic that this brilliantly outreaching creator was in

the end forced to commit suicide, a dreadful one as the historian Tacitus again tells us, in which repeated vein cuttings and ultimately suffocation by steam were required to do the deed.

*when I carried my sons
I carried them for death I carried them for the
Throne
I carried them for final disaster when I carried my
First son
Did I know what was coming did I know
What ropes of blood were twisting together what
Bloody footprints
Were hurrying together in my body
Did I know what past and unfinished reckonings
Were getting flesh again inside me
Did I think that the debts of the past
Were settled before I conceived
I knew the thing in my womb was going to have to
Pay for the whole past
I knew the future was waiting for him like a greedy
God a man-eater in a cave
Was going to ask for everything happiness strength
And finally life
As if no other man existed I carried him for this
For pain and for fear
For hard sharp metal for the cruelty of other men
And his own cruelty
I carried him for disease
For rottenness and dropping to pieces
I carried him for death bones dust I knew*

Readings:

Seneca, *Three Tragedies (Trojan Women; Medea; Phaedra)*, translated and with an introduction by Frederick Ahl (Ithaca, 1986).

Pratt, Norman, *Seneca's Drama* (Chapel Hill, 1983).

Discussion questions:

How does Seneca's Oedipus differ from the Oedipus of Sophocles, in *Oedipus The King*?

What do you see as the connection between Seneca's ethical theory, his Stoicism, and what you are coming to know as his dramatic practice?

Seneca's drama was performed in private readings, rather than on public stages. Can you see why that was an appropriate way to showplace Seneca's work?

The comedies of Plautus are closely related to popular humor and daily entertainments. What larger points—views of life and mankind—do you see Plautus developing through his drama?

How does Seneca's drama reflect the tenor of the age it is written in? Is there melodrama and intensity in both the drama and the age? How do that age, and that melodrama, fit with the Stoic emphasis on calm in Seneca's own world-view?