

NOTES ON SENECA'S TROJAN WOMEN FOR VCE STUDENTS

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Seneca's *Trojan Women*, is, like most of his plays, modelled on a Greek original, Euripides' *Women of Troy*. However, he brings a distinctly Roman attitude to his plays, an attitude no doubt at least partly formed by a life led in and around the courts of the Julio-Claudian emperors. Seneca thrived under Tiberius, fell out of favour with Caligula, returned to Rome on Caligula's death, was exiled by Claudius, then recalled, became influential at the court of Nero (indeed was probably the second most powerful man in Rome, after the emperor) and was eventually sentenced to death by Nero. This eventful and, one assumes, stressful life surely played a part in his somewhat pessimistic view of life. It is hard to see how this could not be the case. After all, his protégé, Nero, murdered his own stepbrother, his stepsister/wife and his mother Agrippina. His second wife, whom he supposedly loved, he kicked to death in a drunken rage. Witnessing such events, even if one were not involved, would not lead one to see life as a sunny, cheerful affair. And Seneca was not uninvolved. He was no innocent, and may even have condoned the killing of Agrippina; certainly he composed a speech for Nero in which he justified his action. In addition to all this, Seneca lived in a Rome where bloody and murderous games were the staple entertainment of the masses.

By philosophy, Seneca was a stoic—that is to say, he advised a life designed around rational behaviour, modesty, and discipline. However, he was criticised by Tacitus for his enormous wealth, which Tacitus says he gained by charging huge rates of interest on loans, and by the habit of soliciting legacies from the rich and childless. It is true that Tacitus puts these charges into the mouth of one Suillius, himself venal and hated. But Tacitus offers no defence of Seneca, and so implicitly accepts the charges.¹ For Seneca, it may have been a case in his mentoring of Nero of 'do what I say, not what I do'.

The Romans had no large and prestigious drama festivals as the Greeks did, and the public taste seems to have been for a vulgar and burlesque form of entertainment. (This may of course have also been the case in Greece.) However, there must have been an audience for tragedy, otherwise it would not have existed, and it is probable that that audience was composed of the more thoughtful members of the Roman elite. There have been suggestions that *Trojan Women*, like Seneca's other plays, was not meant for public performance, but rather for private readings among friends. However, it is not true that the play is impossible to perform as there have been many recent productions, particularly in American university settings.

In Euripides, the women and their fate are at the centre of the play's concerns, in a way that the women in Seneca don't seem to be. The central events of Seneca's play are the two murders, of Polyxena and Astyanax, with the women seen as basically helpless. The discussions of the Greeks, Pyrrhus, son of Achilles, and Agamemnon are given considerable weight, and are in some ways the most entertaining parts of the play. In their debate, following the demand of Achilles' ghost for Polyxena's death, Seneca leaves the declamatory style of the rest of the play and gives us a lively debate about the morality of revenge, hypocrisy and war. It can seem a very modern debate, as Agamemnon, cautioning restraint, is accused of hypocrisy—he murdered his own daughter, Iphigenia, to ensure a fair wind for Troy—and Achilles' old ac-

¹ Tacitus, *Annals of Imperial Rome*, tr. M. Grant (Harmondsworth 1971), 304f.

cusations of cowardice and double standards are raked over by Pyrrhus. Agamemnon gives as good as he gets, calling Pyrrhus 'son of a girl raped by a boy Achilles',² and Achilles a coward:

That day when the Greeks were dying all around him,
Their ships in flames and he lay indolent,
Far from all thought of battle, lazily
Strumming sweet music on a tinkling lyre.³

However, the passage between Pyrrhus and Agamemnon is also the vehicle for some of Seneca's moral comments, another feature of his plays.

And here, Agamemnon is the voice of reason and humanity, tired of the bloodshed and killing of the just-ended Trojan War, calling the planned death of Polyxena 'a brutal murder', and telling Pyrrhus that he should be protecting the name of his father, Achilles, not asking Agamemnon to 'serve him with an act of brutal vengeance'.

Agamemnon's first long speech takes up typically Senecan concerns. He speaks of young men 'who cannot restrain their violence' (could Seneca be thinking of Nero?) and says that 'power unchecked has never lasted long'. Again he may offer this as a warning to Nero. He also suggests how the powerful should behave—'it behoves him to hold his privilege in check'—and warns that 'greatness can fall at a touch'.⁴ Seneca has seen Caligula and Claudius fall, and will in time fall himself, not living to see the final fall of Nero.

In these passages it is easy to see Seneca's concern with the dissolution and immorality of Nero's court, and also the cautious way in which he must express these concerns.

If the reasons for killing Polyxena are superstitious and vengeful, it is left to Ulysses to set out the pragmatic reasons for killing Astyanax. To Ulysses it is a matter of common sense—Astyanax must not be allowed to live, to become another Hector, and Ulysses is almost cheery as he explains this to Andromache, suggesting that she surely 'can't blame' the Greeks for wanting Andromache to cooperate to 'relieve them of this fear'. This is a child, remember, who will be murdered in cold blood, and Ulysses is speaking to the child's mother. He explains that it is not his idea, he's just the messenger but does not hesitate to threaten Andromache with pain and torture if she should resist. This is a very high level of insensitivity, on a level with the kind of pragmatic violence that Nero was prepared to inflict in the murder of his stepbrother, Britannicus, lest Britannicus become a threat to him, as Astyanax might have become a threat to the Greeks.

The world of Seneca is one in which evil triumphs over good, which is equated with reason, and the world described is one in which evil is the most powerful force.

It is also a world which we can recognise. Ulysses' logic is the same as that of those smiling torturers of Abu Ghraib, who told us they were just obeying orders. We live in a world too in which people can seriously discuss the circumstances under which torture might be acceptable, and the levels of torture involved. This is a Senecan world, where pragmatism and violence rule.

2 Seneca, *The Trojan Women*, in *Four Tragedies and Octavia*, tr. E.F. Watling (Harmondsworth 1966), 169.

3 *Ibid.* 168.

4 *Ibid.* 165f.

Good literature is always primarily about ideas and feelings, but there can also be an element of propaganda for, or at least promotion of, the society which produces the work. There can also, of course, be criticism of that society.

In writing *Trojan Women*, Seneca is conscious that the Romans believed themselves to be descended from the Trojans, and therefore the ultimate victors over the Greeks. So he has no qualms about depicting Achilles' ghost as vindictive and bent on revenge, and Ulysses as a smiling functionary, claiming to be just doing his job. In the play, the Greeks are all powerful: victorious and ruthless, winners, but Seneca has no interest in depicting them also as virtuous. To Seneca, heroism does not lie in the deeds of these flawed and vengeful warriors. Only Agamemnon seems to have become tired of the violence, and is a voice supporting reason, older and, perhaps, wiser than the warrior who left for Troy all those years ago.

One might also wonder what glory could come to the Greeks from this act of retribution against defenceless women.

The Romans were perhaps not as religious as the Greeks, but they were very superstitious, and believed in omens and celestial signs of impending disaster. Seneca was part of this society, and the supernatural element of Achilles' message from the dead is typical of scenes in many of his plays, and the interaction between the human and the supernatural is in accord with Roman sensibilities and beliefs.

The feature of Seneca's writing which is most often commented on is its goriness, the graphic and seemingly excessive depictions of extreme violence. What the Greeks left off stage, Seneca gives us upfront. In Euripides, the death of Astyanax has overtones of nobility,

Now, though you lose your father's heritage, you shall have
His broad, bronze fronted shield to make your earthly bed,⁵

and

See, we have brought robes taken from our Trojan dead;
Wrap him in these, to dignify his burial.⁶

But Seneca will not allow the grieving women the consolation of ritual; he explains that it is impossible to retrieve the body for burial, and further, he explains why:

From that sheer fall
What body can remain? The bones were smashed
And scattered by the impact; every trace
Of his fair person, every lineament,
The princely likeness of his father, crushed
To nothing by the body's plunge to ground.
His neck was broken as it struck the rock,
The brains spilled from the shattered skull. He lies
A shapeless corpse.⁷

5 Euripides, *The Women of Troy*, in *The Bacchae and other Plays*, tr. P. Vellacott (Harmondsworth 1973), 128

6 *Ibid.* 129

7 Seneca, *op. cit.*, 202.

And this brutal descriptive writing, together with the appearance of Achilles' vindictive shade, calling for revenge, gives the play an element of the sinister and supernatural which is entirely lacking in Euripides.

Again, the murder of Polyxena, committed offstage in Euripides' play, is described in detail by the messenger. Seneca has him recount,

Her death was swift;
Blood spurted from the mortal wound; and still,
In the act of death, her courage never left her.
She seemed to fling herself with angry force
Upon the ground, as if to pound the earth
Over Achilles' head. Then, friend or foe,
The people wept; but the lament of Troy
Was timid, while the victors cried aloud.
The sacrifice was done. The pool of blood
Neither stood still nor flowed over the ground;
It quickly sank, drunk by the thirsty soil
Of that inexorable tomb.⁸

Nothing here is left to the imagination: Polyxena is heroic—'her courage never left her'—and the speech makes her death seem an act of will, as 'she seemed to fling herself' on Achilles' tomb. But the finality of her defeat is inescapable. Achilles' tomb almost seems to drink her blood, in a vivid representation of the fulfilment of Achilles' wishes. Polyxena's blood soaks into the tomb, and Achilles has, very literally, got what he wanted. Her life blood, sinking into the underworld with him, will satisfy his thirst for revenge.

I think that this emphasis on bloodshed and its graphic depiction can be accounted for by Seneca's role at Nero's court, and his long residence in Imperial Rome, when he must have witnessed death and its aftermath at close quarters. He knew, in a physical and personal way, what he was talking about. He must have seen the gruesome games in the arena which Nero loved, and the killing of enemies of Nero. He knew these things as Euripides did not, and he sees no need to spare us.

Seneca did complain about the bad moral effects of the games. He said he returned from spectacles 'more greedy, more aggressive and more pleasure seeking, more cruel and more inhumane'.⁹ And this seems to sum up his characters. Achilles is greedy for revenge, Pyrrhus, is aggressively seeking to do as his father wants, the deaths are cruel, and the lack of concern shown for the victims is as inhumane as you could imagine.

In Seneca's writing, his life seems always close to the surface, and the dangerous insecurity of life at Nero's court is ever present.

Some criticism has seen Seneca's plays as 'bombastic and frigid, utterly devoid of nature in character and action, full of the most revolting violations of propriety' and his characters motivated by 'an unnatural heroism', and 'a passion alike unnatural'.¹⁰ It was also felt that the plays were not meant to be performed and that performance was in fact impossible. This is clearly untrue, as they have been frequently performed, as noted earlier and as for the sugges-

⁸ *Ibid.* 204.

⁹ Seneca, *Epistle* 7.3

¹⁰ Alfred Bates, at <http://www.theatrehistory.co/ancient/seneca002.html>

tion that they are poor literary examples of human beings, their violence too grotesque to be believable, I could not disagree more. His characters, to me, are written about in our newspapers every day (think Saddam Hussein, Robert Mugabe, the people who bombed the London Underground or the Sari Club in Bali) and while their behaviour may disgust and horrify us, we would be foolish to see them as unnatural. And propriety? Well, should a playwright show us the world as he sees it, or cover its excesses with a veil of propriety? For a moralist like Seneca, the answer is obvious.