Seneca’s Reception in the Renaissance

- **Seneca’s life and times**
  - L. Annaeus Seneca, 2nd son of L. Annaeus Seneca (the Elder), born ca. 4 BCE. Attained eminence as an orator by 39 CE, almost killed by Caligula for speaking well in the senate with the emperor watching.¹
  - 41-49 CE: Exiled to Corsica under Claudius, influenced by Messalina, accusing him of adultery with Caligula’s sister Iulia Livilla
  - 49: Agrippina the Younger has Seneca recalled from exile to tutor Nero
  - 54: Nero’s reign begins; *quinquennium Neronis* with Burrus the praetorian prefect as sidekick.
  - 62: Burrus dies, Seneca’s hold over Nero and political influence is broken, attempts to retire and leaves public life
  - 65: Compelled to suicide by Nero who accuses him of complicity in the Pisonian conspiracy

- **Overview of Seneca’s surviving work**
  - Ethical treatises:
    - *De providentia, De constantia sapientis, De ira, Ad Marciam de consolatione, De vita beata, De otiio, De tranquitate animi, De brevitate vitae, Ad polybium de consolatione, Ad helviam de consolatione*
  - Other extant prose:
    - *De clementia, De beneficiis, Naturales quaestiones, Epistulae Morales, Apocolocyntosis*
  - Tragedies
    - *Hercules furens, Troades, Phoenissae, Medea, Phaedra, Oedipus, Agamemnon, Thyestes* (plus Octavia and *Hercules Oetaeus*, of doubtful authenticity but traditional part of the “Tenne Tragedies”)
    - Seneca “uses Greek material to comment obliquely on the outrages of Nero’s court and describes a world that is radically evil” – Senecan tragedy follows a form Atkins identifies as beginning “with a Cloud of Evil, then witness the defeat of Reason by Evil, and finally experience the Triumph of Evil”.²

- **Reception of Seneca**
  - Impact of Senecan Tragedy on the Renaissance Dramatists:
    - “No author exercised a wider or deeper influence upon the Elizabethan mind or upon the Elizabethan form of tragedy than did Seneca” – T.S. Eliot.
    - “Dramatists in the period imitated and alluded to the plots, characters, rhetorical devices and lines from Seneca so frequently that one Elizabethan author [Thomas Nashe] complained that English playwrights were actually killing Seneca”³, that they were “triviall

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¹ Dio 59.19.7
² Arkins, 1.
translators” and simply copied Seneca’s “good sentences” and “tragical speeches”, bleeding him dry.\(^4\)

- Staging and Translations contributed to his influence:
  - Performances of *The Trojan Women, Medea, and Oedipus* between 1551 and 1563\(^5\)
  - Tragedies translated by Jasper Heywood 1559-1581\(^6\); Heywood’s translations helped make Roman tragedy one of the greatest influences on Elizabethan drama; Thomas Newton’s *Tenne Tragedies* first complete edition of Seneca’s plays in English.\(^7\)

- Shakespeare
  - The “most Senecan” plays of Shakespeare are *Titus Andronicus, Hamlet; Richard III, Macbeth*; the plays that most contribute to these are *The Trojan Women, Phaedra, Thyestes, Agamemnon and Hercules Furens*.\(^8\)
    - *Titus Andronicus*: Titus cooks Tamora’s sons, which directly borrows from *Thyestes*, an important influence on the play. Shakespeare’s most shocking play comes from borrowing Seneca’s emphasis on *scelus* as a locus of tragic action in setting the stage for *Titus*.\(^9\)
      - E.g. “*Sceleran non ulcisceris, nisi vincis*” Thyestes 195-6 and “*per scelera semper sceleribus tutum est iter*” Agamemnon 115. Seneca’s version of the Thyestes myth “emphasizes a central theme, the legacy of crime in the house of Tantalus”.\(^10\)
      - Aaron the Moor based on the character of Atreus in *Thyestes*.\(^11\)
      - “For *Titus Andronicus* and for other plays, what Seneca offers Shakespeare, above all else, is an inimical universe in which evil triumphs”\(^12\), thus:

    \[
    \text{... in nos aetas}
    
    \text{ultima venit?}
    
    \text{...}
    
    \text{Abeant questus, discede, timor:}
    
    \text{vitae est avidus quisquis non vult}
    
    \text{mundo secum pereunte mori [Thy. 876-78, 882-84]}
    \]

    - *Hamlet*: “Seneca cannot be too heavy, nor
    
    Plautus too light.”
    
    - Act 2 Scene 2

- Other Elizabethan playwrights influenced by Seneca: Ben Jonson, Thomas Kyd (the Spanish Tragedy), Christopher Marlowe (Jew of Malta), John Marston; other Renaissance influences – Corneille and Racine, Francis Bacon in the *Advancement of Learning* (1605): “after he [Seneca] had consecrated that *Quinquennium Neronis* to the eternall glorie of learned

\(^5\) Arkins, 3.
\(^6\) *ibid*.
\(^7\) Winston, “English Seneca”, 1.
\(^8\) Arkins, 4.
\(^9\) *ibid*, 5.
\(^10\) *ibid*, 5.
\(^12\) *ibid*. 
Governors, held on his honest and loyall course of good and free Counsell, after his Maister grew extreamely corrupt in his government”

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