EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES

Curtis Perry, *Shakespeare and Senecan Tragedy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020). x+296pp. ISBN 978 1 1084 9617 9.

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Curtis Perry's *Shakespeare and Senecan Tragedy* is a rich, complex and thought-provoking book that breaks new ground in Shakespeare studies by complicating our understanding of Shakespeare's engagement with Senecan drama and philosophy. Perry's primary objective is to counter the 'tendency to treat Shakespeare's most admired plays as visionary and modern while thinking of Senecan drama as postclassical, imitative, and relatively uninteresting' that has been dominant in modern and contemporary criticism because he is confident that 'recovering a Senecan Shakespeare might change the way we think about the modernity of the Shakespearean text' (p. 113).

In tackling the relationship between Seneca and Shakespeare, Perry follows in the footsteps of and enters conversation with such landmark studies as Gordon Braden's *Renaissance Tragedy and the Senecan Tradition* and Robert S. Miola's *Shakespeare and Classical Tragedy*, as well as more recent books such as Colin Burrow's *Shakespeare & Classical Antiquity* and Jonathan Bate's *How the Classics Made Shakespeare*.[1] Perry lucidly sets out the book's premises and aims in the first of seven chapters and then delves into the Senecan intertext in *Richard III*, *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, *Coriolanus*, *Titus Andronicus* and *Othello*, devoting an entire chapter to each play. The volume is ideally divided into two halves: the first half 'looks at how Shakespeare uses the representational/characterological resources of Senecan tragedy and at how they have helped make Shakespeare seem modern to modern critics'; the second half

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[1] Gordon Braden, *Renaissance Tragedy and the Senecan Tradition: Anger's Privilege* (New Haven, CT.: Yale University Press, 1985); Robert S. Miola, *Shakespeare and Classical Tragedy: The Influence of Seneca* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992); Colin Burrow, *Shakespeare & Classical Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Jonathan Bate, *How the Classics Made Shakespeare* (Princeton: Princeton, NJ.: Princeton University Press, 2019).

'examines the way Shakespearean tragedy thematizes the politics of radical intervention in relation to a political vocabulary grounded in Rome's pervasive historical exemplarity' (p. 7).

In Chapter 1, Perry observes that the present understanding of Shakespeare's engagement with Seneca 'has been distorted by centuries of critical disdain' and that, even though Seneca is now recognized as an important influence for early modern tragedy, scholars 'remain unlikely to see his influence as an especially robust or interesting one' (p. 2), especially so by virtue of Shakespeare's reputation 'as the representative poet of modernity' (p. 11). In fact, Perry seeks to challenge conventional wisdom by arguing that 'Shakespearean tragedy is often indebted to Seneca where it seems most forward-looking in its exploration of radical individuation and its limits' (pp. 3–4) and that 'canonical readings from modern Shakespeare criticism respond to what is Senecan in Shakespeare without knowing it' (p. 4). Such an interpretation only becomes possible when one looks at Senecan tragedy not 'as failed artistic mimesis' (p. 20), but as a kind of tragic drama 'that experiments self-consciously with the relationship between rhetoric and character' (p. 23).

Chapter 2 views 'the tension between the self-creating virtuosity' of the eponymous character of *Richard III* 'and the larger determining structures (providential, historical, maledictory) in which he finds himself ultimately enmeshed' (p. 39) as a result of Senecan influence. By tending 'to emphasize *both* the autonomous self-commanding force of the individual *and* the way that the determining power of the past scripts or shapes the present' (p. 38), Seneca's tragedies provided Shakespeare with a framework in which to think about historical narrative in a play such as *Richard III*, in which 'The tyrant's attempt to lay his own plots … is caught between a providentially destined historical future that insists on the inescapability of the Tudor myth and the claims of the past' (p. 63).

In the third chapter —the highlight of the volume together with the fourth — Perry argues that 'engagement with Senecan tragedy contributes significantly to the sophistication of *Hamlet*' and that Shakespeare's building upon Senecan resources 'created a scaffolding … upon which much of *Hamlet*'s modern criticism', which sees Hamlet as 'proleptically modern or postmodern', has been erected (p. 73). Seneca's tragedies, Perry observes, 'juxtapose … the pursuit of autarkic selfhood with a multifaceted thematic focus upon the ways that characters are subject to prior or external contingencies that cast an ironic light on the very idea of self-determination' (p. 74). Hence, claims Perry, the critical tendency to interrogate Hamlet's interiority so probingly depends on the fact that *Hamlet* has 'obvious parallels in the nuts and bolts of

Senecan drama, which tends to feature long speeches depicting states of mind of characters *in extremis* and a looser connection between them and the demands of plot than in other extant classical tragedy' (p. 78). Identifying the Senecan matrix in the play therefore demonstrates that 'what Shakespeare does in *Hamlet* is better understood as part of a complex intertextual conversation than as an isolated lighting strike of appropriative genius' (p. 81).

The stamp of Seneca is especially on display in *King Lear*, as Perry demonstrates in Chapter 4. In the first part of the play, argues Perry, 'examples culled from Senecan drama' — and from *Oedipus* and *Thyestes* above all — 'help characterize the king's self-isolating anger and his flat refusal to countenance anything resembling a reciprocal relationship with his daughters' (p. 111). In the second section of *King Lear*, 'Shakespeare renders the resulting isolation via self-conscious imitation of … the signature flights of rhetorical excess, drawing upon cosmological, natural, and mythical reference, used to express passionate extremity in Senecan drama' (p. 111). Finally, the reconciliations in the final part of the play are viewed as reminiscent of 'Seneca's two major scenes of fraught and partial reconciliation — between Oedipus and Antigone in the first portion of *Phoenissae*, and between Hercules and Amphitryon at the end of *Hercules Furens*' — although Shakespeare is less pessimistic about them, inasmuch as 'His protagonists are more willing than Seneca to countenance neediness, both because a Christian ethic is suspicious of human self-sufficiency and because Shakespeare is interested in exploring the limits of autarkic Senecan selfhood as well as its dramatic affordances' (p. 112).

Chapter 5 is devoted to *Coriolanus*, a play that, as Perry acknowledges, 'does not feature the kind of concrete redeployments of specific Senecan intertexts that Robert Miola has so productively explicated throughout the majority of Shakespeare's other tragedies' (p. 166). Here, according to Perry, 'Shakespeare uses Seneca's markedly post-republican mode of characterization for his own early-republican hero, and … he does so with a full awareness of the imperial provenance of Senecan tragedy and a richly theoretical interest in the meaning of the resulting representational anachronism', so that 'Shakespeare's distinctively Senecan Coriolanus represents something like the imperial kernel within republican Rome' (p. 154). Perry sees the Roman warrior as Senecan especially because, while initially just refusing to take part in the daily life of his community, 'he winds up, like a Senecan antihero, being driven to re-create himself through transgressive violence'; eventually, 'Shakespeare associates the breakdown of republican community with the emergence of a Senecan psychology' (p. 179).

In Chapter 6, Perry tackles *Titus Andronicus* to identify 'a larger and more distinctive role for Senecan tragedy in the play's conception … that has to do with Senecan tragedy's imperial provenance and with its multifaceted thematization of *Romanitas* as dispersed and belated with relation to earlier Roman culture and ideals' (pp. 202–3). Perry especially explores the Senecan contribution to Shakespeare's linking 'hidden and monstrous mental states to the phenomenon of global empire', which makes 'geography and psychology become symbolically interconnected' (p. 188). More specifically, Perry claims, '*Titus Andronicus* is Senecan in the way it links the emblematic, psychological resonance of its proto-gothic pit to its anatomy of a geopolitical world in which public coordinates for identity have been vitiated or dispersed. What remains is belated citation of a lost Roman couture and the dramatic aesthetics of gothic or horror' (pp. 209–10).

Chapter 7 finds Senecan intertexts threaded throughout *Othello*, a play that 'is not obviously Senecan in design', and 'reads these intertexts as lively signifiers to a degree not typically allowed for within the protocols of an older model of literary source study' (p. 260). Perry suggests that Iago transforms Othello 'into a figure of encaved, Senecan inwardness' (p. 252), thereby converting him 'from an exemplary performer of Ciceronian decorum to a Senecan monster' (p. 242). For Perry, it is especially Iago that has Seneca's fingerprints all over him, in that 'like Seneca's hammy *ur*-villain Atreus, Iago becomes a kind of surrogate playwright mediating audience response to the action as it unfolds' (p. 231). And even though Iago is frequently described in scholarship as the heir of the morality plays' Vice, Perry forcefully argues that 'there is no reason to consider medieval and Senecan dramatic traditions to be mutually exclusive' (p. 245); in fact, 'for a writer familiar with both morality drama and Senecan tragedy, fusing the model of evil represented by Atreus with the vice tradition would probably have seemed obvious' (p. 246).

Perry's argument for a reconsideration of Shakespeare's engagement with Senecan texts, tropes and techniques is cumulatively persuasive, even though some sections are less convincing than others, as is the case with the chapter on *Coriolanus*, in which the absence of evident textual links — which Perry does find in all the other five Shakespearean tragedies he considers — somehow weakens his views, even if one is willing to entertain a more flexible notion of such concepts as source and influence than an older model of literary study did. In addition, the book occasionally feels more about Seneca than about Shakespeare: some discussions of the Senecan material tend to sound repetitive after a few chapters, and they could have perhaps been somewhat shortened. Nevertheless, Perry is extremely precise in his documentation, extraordinarily thorough in surveying and discussing the intertextual evidence and uniquely acute in his detailed analyses of individual plays. On top of that, the breadth of his reading and erudition is

astonishing. In a lucid prose style, Perry marshals an impressive quantity of research and displays extensive critical awareness: he is particularly deft at fusing discussions of non-Shakespearean material — e.g., John Marston's *Antonio* plays, Albertino Mussato's *Ecerinis*, Giovanni Battista Giraldi's *Orbecche* and *Hecatommiti*, George Chapman's *Byron* plays and George Peele's *The Battle of Alcazar* — seamlessly into his discussion of Shakespeare, thus enormously enriching his argument and making it even more persuasive. Moreover, Perry problematizes psychoanalytical readings of Shakespearean characters without rejecting them and is entirely convincing in his bracing claim that Senecan tragedy needs to be considered an extremely insistent frame of reference with which Shakespeare engaged deeply and programmatically in his tragic storytelling. Starting from Seneca, Curtis Perry's *Shakespeare and Senecan Tragedy* manages to reorient many of the critical issues that have been central to modern and contemporary scholarly discussions of Shakespeare, thereby producing brilliant results and providing a hugely valuable contribution to Shakespeare and early modern studies, as well as classical reception studies.