SENECAN INFLUENCE ON SHYLOCK'S 'HATH NOT A JEW EYES?' SPEECH

It used to be widely believed that Seneca was a potent influence on Elizabethan drama. In recent years, this view has been vigorously attacked by G. K. Hunter in two articles which first appeared in 1967 and 1974 and which can now usefully be found together in his Dramatic Identities and Cultural Tradition (Liverpool, 1978). Hunter acknowledges kinship with Howard Baker's thinking in Induction to Tragedy (Louisiana, 1939). I believe the anti-Senecan view to be mistaken, and answer it in my edition of Jasper Heywood's translation of Seneca's Thyestes (London, 1982). Essentially, the Baker-Hunter view is 'anti-Senecan' in that it not only will not grant Seneca the influential status formerly accorded to him, but is also based on a thorough dislike of his writings. In this paper, I am at least as concerned with what I consider to be the beneficial impact of Seneca on Shakespeare (in one important speech), as with the mere fact of Shakespeare's debt to the Roman author.

Without repeating my arguments in Thyestes, I should nevertheless like to stress that there can be no doubt that Shakespeare did read Seneca's plays in Latin. For example, as others have observed, 'the note to oceano (Hipp. 717) in editions of Shakespeare's time read: Non ipse Neptunus, universo mari suo' (cf. B. R. Rees, 'English Seneca: a Preamble', Greece and Rome, Oct. 1969, p. 121). Shakespeare echoes the note (and oceano) in Macbeth II.ii.60-3:

Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood
Clean from my hand? No; this my hand will rather
The multitudinous seas incarnadine,
Making the green one red.

For one thing, such an instance shows that the influence of Seneca (or at least a Seneca edition) on Shakespeare was direct, and that the argument that we cannot distinguish between seemingly Senecan traits and real ones is false — an important point, since it is especially this argument which the anti-Senecans are fond of using when they wish to deny Senecan influence.

But I am not suggesting that the Senecan influence on Shakespeare is always as precisely verbal as this. Generally, when Senecan influence is manifest, Shakespeare will use the odd word or phrase directly from a Latin edition or

1 It should be remembered that Renaissance editions of Seneca's plays often differ significantly from modern ones, and that sometimes notes accompanying Seneca's text may be as influential as that text itself. Nevertheless, modern readers who have no access to Renaissance editions, or who have little Latin, can derive reasonable benefit from reading the plays in the Loeb series, which prints the Latin and the (modern) English on facing pages. (Cf. note 4, below.)

2 Shakespeare quotations are from Peter Alexander's edition of The Complete Works (London and Glasgow, 1951).
from Thomas Newton's collection of translations of Seneca's plays, *Seneca His Tenne Tragedies* (1581). However, we often see Shakespeare in the process of paraphrasing Seneca, and amalgamating ideas and expressions typically Senecan, but culled from various places in Seneca's work. This, I suggest, is what happens in the case of Shylock's famous and crucial 'Hath not a Jew eyes?' speech (*The Merchant of Venice*, III.i.44-62).

Shylock explains to Salerio that Antonio's flesh, if it will feed nothing else, 'will feed my revenge', and goes on:

He hath disgrac'd me and hind'red me half a million; laugh'd at my losses, mock'd at my gains, scorned my nation, thwarted my bargains, cooled my friends, heated mine enemies. And what's his reason? I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions, fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer, as a Christian is? If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die? And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge? If we are like you in the rest, we will resemble you in that. If a Jew wrong a Christian, what is his humility? Revenge. If a Christian wrong a Jew, what should his sufferance be by Christian example? Why, revenge. The villainy you teach me I will execute; and it shall go hard but I will better the instruction.

Shylock's final sentence does not express the Old Testament's 'an eye for an eye' attitude, but rather the typically Senecan notion that the teacher of evil must expect his example to be imitated by his pupil, to the extent that, as Macbeth says (I.vii.8-10), '... we but teach/Bloody instructions, which being taught return/To plague th'inventor'. One important *locus* for this thought in Seneca is *Thyestes*, ii.136-8 (in my edition of Heywood's version):

> What thing against their uncle now you them instruct to do,  
> Perhaps with you to work the like they will not be adread;  
> Such mischief wrought hath oft return'd upon the worker's head.

It is not unlikely that Shakespeare remembered Heywood's English rather than Seneca's Latin; the important point, at any rate, is that we must recognize Shylock's (and Macbeth's) words as Senecan, and that Shakespeare, like Seneca, wishes us to realize that revenge, even though, as Shylock admits, a 'villainy', finds its source in the original actions of evil-doers like Macbeth and racist Christians' rather than (at least at first) in the minds of their victims.

Far from being anti-Semitic, as critics so often think Shakespeare shows himself in this play, the dramatist primarily reveals — and not just in Shylock's eminent plea here — what evil is caused by the way in which those who are in power treat the weak. Shylock's position in Venetian society resembles that of slaves in Seneca's Rome, and we need not doubt that Shakespeare found support, for his own enlightened attitude, in Seneca's, who writes for example in Epistle XLVII of *Ad Lucilium Epistulae Morales* (widely known in Shakespeare's time):
Kindly remember that he whom you call your slave sprang from the same stock, is smiled upon by the same skies, and on equal terms with yourself breathes, lives, and dies. It is just as possible for you to see in him a free-born man as for him to see in you a slave.4

It is not difficult to see that much of Shakespeare’s speech is a brilliant amplification of this passage. Most importantly, both authors stress the essential humanity shared by the strong and the weak, despite superficial appearances to the contrary, and, notably, the claims of the strong that they are superior. As Seneca explains in the same letter, it befits ‘a sensible and well-educated man’ to be on friendly terms with his slaves. However, the Romans are ‘excessively haughty, cruel and insulting’ towards them — just as the Venetians are towards Shylock.5 It is as a result of such an attitude that the weak turn against the strong: slaves ‘are not enemies when we acquire them; we make them enemies’. Seneca mentions the example of the one-time slave Callistus, who, once he got the opportunity, took his revenge on his one-time master by making him stand in the line before the door and shutting him out ‘while others were welcomed’.

We may blame Callistus for wanting his pound of flesh, as we may Shylock. Equally, however, we may be sure that Shakespeare’s use of Seneca’s Epistle should lead us to examine the reason for Shylock’s attitude, which is not that Shylock is innately vicious as a Jew or individual, but that he is the victim of such goading and contempt as the Venetians subject him to at the beginning.

4 Vol. I of the Loeb Series (Cambridge, Mass., and London; repr. 1961). Different parts of Seneca’s oeuvre have been translated for the Loeb series by different scholars over a period of several years, but the whole series is now available. Vol. I was translated by Richard M. Gummere in 1917, and of course it would be sound scholarly procedure to print the accompanying Latin, or, better still, the Latin from an edition Shakespeare may have used, for example the Editio Princeps of 1475, or Erasmus’s (1515), or Lipsius’s (1605). This procedure would, however, also take up much space, and hardly seems necessary in an essay for non-Latinists who can in any case consult the Loeb text and whom I wish to persuade of Shakespeare’s inclination to paraphrase and re-work Seneca’s language rather than to translate it word for word. Furthermore, Shakespeare may have consulted more than one Latin edition. He must have worked directly from a Latin text, since the first English translation of the Epistulae Morales, by Thomas Lodge, did not appear until 1614.

5 Shakespeare actually draws the comparison between Shylock and slaves. In IV.i.90–5, Shylock says:

    You have among you many a purchas’d slave,
    Which, like your asses and your dogs and mules,
    You use in abject and in slavish parts,
    Because you bought them; shall I say to you
    'Let them be free, marry them to your heirs
    Why sweat they under burdens? ...'

Shakespeare has in mind the following sentence from Epistle XLVII: ‘I shall pass over other cruel and inhuman conduct towards them; for we maltreat them, not as if they were men, but as if they were beasts of burden.’ It is highly improbable that Shakespeare accidentally echoes Seneca’s comparison between slaves (’them’) and beasts of burden. It is also unlikely that he does not want us to see a parallel between the slaves mentioned by Shylock and Shylock himself: Shylock wants his pound of flesh because he has been treated like a slave, and now, in revenge, he is just as possessive about what he considers to be his property as the Venetians have been about what they saw as theirs.
and end of the play. I believe that a careful reading of The Merchant of Venice establishes Shakespeare's point about primary culpability in any case. However, the significance of Shakespeare's debt to Seneca is that it shows — unequivocally and beyond personal belief — that both dramatists were more civilized and searching humanitarians than Shakespeare is not infrequently, and Seneca quite generally, considered to be.

Flinders University JOOST DAALDER of South Australia