

University of Art, Graz
Theatre Studies and Dramatics
University Professor
Drⁱⁿ Evelyn Deutsch - Schreiner

The Cruel Act on the Theatre Stage
A Dramatic Analysis of Cruel Deeds in
Seneca's Revenge Tragedies in a Societal Context

The aim of this dissertation is to find possible answers to the question, whether Seneca's works are suitable for today's theatre stage. They are hardly performed in contrast to Greek dramas of Aischylos, Sophokles and Euripides, although they had a significant influence on the European drama. Put differently, its influence on Shakespeare cannot be denied.

Moreover, also aspects of historical reception and context (for example: Sarah Kane „Phedra`s Love) should be dealt with as well as the question whether or under which circumstances it makes sense for the modern theatre to rely on Seneca's works .

It could be argued against the traditional believe that Seneca's tragedies were filled with too much violence and cruelty, that the modern theatre with its endless technical possibilities does not put the primary focus on the theatre text, but on the performance instead in combination with different elements (such as play, choir, pantomime, dance, music and alienation). Because of these factors and the endless possible approaches offered, Seneca's tragedies could still be very interesting. Furthermore, Seneca's tragedies could also be useful to give new insights on relevant topics for society such as blood revenge, family conflicts, humans acting in exceptional situations and the encounter with unknown cultures and differentness in today's world.

The theatre as a place which wants to treat cruelty as important topic in order to question today's politics, to shock others, to wake people up and raise attention for relevant themes for today's society, could easily rely on Seneca's tragedies.

The following methodological approaches will be proposed for this dissertation:

- Dramatic Analysis of Seneca's tragedies Hercules furens, Troades, Phoenissae, Medea, Phaedra, Oedipus, Agamemno and Thyest.
- Dramatic Analysis in general (content, figures, analysis of different scenes, dramatic compositions, text)
- Analysis and comparison of advantages as well as disadvantages of translations, adaption of text and performance. (for example Theodor Thomann, Durs Grünbein)

- A study of the political and social context of the Roman imperial period with an emphasis on the time of Emperor Nero.
- Studies concerning the question whether there are any analogies with the political and social context nowadays in order to explain the explosive nature of topics dealt with in Seneca's tragedies.
- Special emphasis will be put on the presentation of the political context in times of Emperor Nero. The question whether Nero was really the cruel emperor, self-exposer and psychopath as often depicted and if Seneca's tragedies only try to work through this area. Maybe Nero was not crueller than his predecessors, which is tried to be proved by the ongoing research around Nero. Cruelty was nothing special in ancient times but it was not always depicted with such great intensity as in Seneca.

If Seneca does not at all or not only deal with self-experience – what was he doing instead? Are these factors mentioned above relevant in any way for the question concerning the relevance of Seneca's works for modern theatre?

Seneca's protagonists often seem very thoughtful and self-determined. They act according to a plan and reflect their deeds, they want to destroy in order to shock others and to defeat them. According to Manfred Fuhrmann, Seneca's tragedies are psychological dramas, not action dramas. Through depicting cruelty and violence, vice, delusion and madness should be criticised with theatrical means. The focus is on fighting the "Furor" in order to gain "Ataraxia" as ideal of the stoa.

Fascinating would also be the connection with „Hamartia“.

Are Seneca's protagonists deliberately guilty or do they kill in affect? To which degree are the protagonists self-determined? Is their self-determination judged? Do they follow god's orders, which forces them to act with cruelty? Do the protagonists have alternatives? Also the motive of revenge should be put into consideration.

Revenge and its justification and non-justification depends on the culture in which it is experienced and lived out. In our civilisation, acting out of revenge means breaking a norm. In ancient times, in comparison, revenge meant fulfilling societal norms and moral duties.

Which function does depicting the cruel have in ancient drama, in ancient society, in modern drama and in the multi-cultural society?

The most thrilling part about the present is the meeting of different values and resulting from this, the judgment of the cruel. Which role could the theatre play in working through the differences? Should it raise awareness, or explicitly show the cruel and judge it?

Which different topoi, structures and scenic schemata are used by Seneca and his predecessors?

All these questions should be dealt with in this dissertation.

The aim is to create a text reader with comments and descriptions (context, additional material, original quotes) as possible repertoire for the stage, so Seneca as dramatist is not only seen as source for work in progress, but instead as independent dramatist whose plays can be performed on modern theatre stages as well.

A further goal is to underline the different forms of cruelty and violence from ancient times until the present with focus on the following questions:

- How does the abysmal work in different cultures and epochs?
- How are victims in ancient times dealt with in comparisons to victims in the present?
- Under which circumstances can ritual acts of violence be depicted as ekphraseis on stage?

The research and analysis only put emphasis on the following tragedies of Seneca: Hercules, Troades, Phoenissae, Medea, Phaedra, Oedipus, Agamemnon, Thyestes.