

**HAMLET’S STOIC DELAY: SHAKESPEAREAN APPROACH TO SENECA
PHILOSOPHY¹⁸**

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Abstract

Seneca’s impact on the Renaissance tragedians is undeniable. His depictions of violence, terror and murder experienced by humans pursuing their passions became a model for the early modern English tragedies. Senecan tragic elements, the ghost, the chorus; and stock characters such as the hag and the tyrant can be found in the works of Thomas Kyd, John Marston, George Chapman, and others, guiding their style in tragic writing. As a Renaissance dramatist, Shakespeare, in *Hamlet*, refers to Seneca from a different perspective by responding to his stoic philosophy. It is asserted in this study that in the play, Hamlet struggles to be a true stoic and desires to be purified like Horatio as it is apparent in his famous delay. He takes the stoic cure of delaying to deal with anger and pursues this judgement almost until the end of the play. Hamlet fails, while Horatio succeeds, in following the stoic teaching of avoiding human passions. This study argues that through these characters, Shakespeare shows that stoic teachings that block human emotions are not practical with the extreme conditions one faces in life. Hamlet is a human with all the dilemmas, passions and rage that make him real, while Horatio does not seem realistic with his indifference towards all the tragedy around him. Thus, Shakespeare keeps Hamlet within the boundaries of humanity by enabling him to finally decide to take action, no matter the outcome.

Key words: *Hamlet*, Horatio, Shakespeare, Seneca, stoicism.

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Introduction

Lucius Anneus Seneca, since the rediscovery of his plays in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, had a great impact on Renaissance tragedians and he has been revisited by western authors of various genres: Seneca's tragedies have not ceased to influence the Roman world and beyond (Dodson-Robinson, 2009). As the author of eight extant tragedies -*Hercules Furens*, *Troades*, *Medea*, *Phaedra*, *Oedipus*, *Agamemnon*, *Thyestes*, *Phoenissae*- Seneca inspired Renaissance tragedies with "vivid and powerful verse, psychological insight, highly effective staging, an intellectually demanding verbal and conceptual framework and a precocious preoccupation with theatricality and theatricalization" (Boyle, 1997, p.15). His tragedies are replete with violence and terror and formed with bombastic language. Among the themes that he often covered in his plays are revenge, murder, cannibalism, and infanticide which we are familiar with from the contents of Renaissance tragedies.

It is the human, driven by passion that captures all Senecan tragedies. He often portrays people who are hunted by their emotions, such as rage, vengeance, lust, obsession, jealousy, and greed. According to Seneca, the most dangerous of these is anger which is likely to result in excessive violence and destruction, as he demonstrates in his plays. In *Medea*, Medea kills her own children out of rage for her husband, Jason. In *Thyestes*, Atreus arranges a feast for his brother where he prepares a meal by cooking his children, Juno makes Hercules mad after cursing him for killing his own wife and children in *Hercules Furens*. Likewise, in *Phaedra*, Theseus murders his own son Hippolytus out of the false accusation that he raped his stepmother. Probably the most famous of Senecan heroes, Oedipus is so angry with himself because of his fate that he gouges his own eyes with his bare hands (Wilson, 2010, p. xvii). The common trait of all these characters is their lack of resistance against the passion that seizes their whole beings. They lack mercy and forgiveness. They are always on the extreme edge of their emotions away from compromise, which result in brutality as in *Trojan Women*. After their defeat, the Greeks both ruin the city, rape the women, and kill the children including Priam and Hecuba's daughter Polyxena, and Hector's son Astyanax (Wilson, 2010, p. xvi-xvii). As it frequently happens in these plays, Seneca seems to have provided the Renaissance playwrights such as Shakespeare, with great displays of the limits of human capability of violence under the influence of passion.

Hence, Hamlet in Shakespeare's play, no matter how long he suppresses his emotions, is no exception to Senecan portrayal of emotional outburst.

Senecan Influence on Early Elizabethan Tragedies

Seneca's tragedies "focus less on the relationship of people to one another, and more on the relationship of individuals to their own passions. ... In comparison with Athenian tragedy, Seneca's plays focus less on the workings of the divine in human life and more on the conflicts within human nature itself" (Wilson, 2010, p. xx-xxi). He often searches the limits of anger, cruelty and violence and pictures tragic endings with unlimited suffering. Senecan tragic elements: the ghost, the chorus, stock characters such as the nurse, the hag and the tyrant, together with Senecan rhetoric and epigram fascinated Elizabethan dramatists. Inherited from Greek tragedy, mostly from Euripides, the tradition was embraced by the Renaissance playwrights (Lucas, 2009, p. 13). Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* established the Senecan form in the shape of revenge tragedy. The ghost, the chorus and passion which lead to violence are all present in the play. Kyd's *Soliman and Persida* (1588), Lust's *Dominion* (1550), Shakespeare's *Richard III* (1593), Marston's *Antonia and Mellida* (1599), Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (1602), Chapman's *Bussy d'Ambois* (1603) and *Revenge* (1613) are among the prominent plays of renaissance drama influenced heavily by Seneca.

Boyle (2008) emphasises Renaissance tragedy's indebtedness to Senecan idea of tragedy asserting that Seneca's tyrannical figures become a role model for Renaissance tyrants starting from *Gorboduc* (p. 388). Atreus especially often reappears in sixteenth and seventeenth century plays shaping the tyrants throughout the centuries. Boyle further expresses that: "the tyrant's resort to torture...and predilection for the murder of children have their origins in Atreus and materialize themselves in [Renaissance plays such as] Mussato's Ezzelino, Cinthio's Sulmone, Sperone's Eolo, Marlowe's Tamburlaine and Barabas, Richard III, Marston's Piero and Antonio ... Corneille's Cleopatre (who fuses Atreus and Medea) Grimoald, and Phocas" (p. 389). As for Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*, he models Hercules from *Hercules Furens* from Seneca. Titus's murdering his children echoes Hercules's slaying of his wife and children, He also imitates Atreus when he serves Chiron and Demetrius to Tamora and Saturninus as a pie. Unlike Seneca,

Shakespeare does not confine himself to one tyrant, as Boyle suggests, in Shakespeare, “tyrannical characteristics are split between characters to allow for greater complexity of audience response” such as Aaron and Titus in *Titus Andronicus* (p. 391). For *Hamlet*, although Claudius has the leading role in tyranny, he shares the viciousness with Gertrude and Polonius.

Seneca and Stoic Philosophy

Seneca is among the prominent leaders of Roman stoicism, which is also called as the new stoicism, with Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius. Zeno, the founder of stoicism, declares the soul as *tabula rasa*, a blank space and perception as the source of knowledge. Thus, happiness is related to how we perceive things. Seneca believes that happiness is innate, and a wise man’s state of mind is free from external circumstances. His happiness is unattached to the events beyond his control. He is prepared for the future and does not let the external world affect his soul (İşıldak, 1996). In “On Anger”, Seneca advises us to be content with what we already have, and not to disturb our souls with passions uncontrolled by the mind. He states that:

Passion, then, consists not in being stirred in response to impressions presented to us, but in surrendering ourselves to those impressions and following up the mind’s first chance movement. Turning pale, shedding tears, the first stirrings of sexual arousal, a deep sigh, a suddenly sharpened glance, anything along these lines: whoever reckons them a clear token of passion and a sign of the mind’s engagement is just mistaken and fails to understand that they’re involuntarily bodily movements. (p. 36)

For Seneca, emotions are the disturbance of the body that needs to be avoided. Further, he warns us to be careful about our reactions to the first impressions. Seneca’s philosophy deems unrestricted passions as dangerous and advises to be indifferent to external events to be purified from unhealthy emotions that can harm the soul. Hence, he narrates the story of an old man in “On Anger”, that Cicero mentioned similarly in *Tusculan Disputations*¹⁹. The man calmly responds to the murder of his son in front of his eyes by Caesar and does not leave the banquet to bury his son obeying the king’s orders. Seneca praises the man for his tranquillity and delaying

¹⁹ Written around 45 BC, it consists of five books. The work focuses on the elevation of passion and pain through wisdom.

his anger for the sake of saving his other son's head. This is an example of a behaviour approved by the stoics.

No matter what fate brings, being indifferent is the key to happiness. In this way, one can reach *summum bonum*, the highest good, free from the kind of passions that may cause false judgements (Mitsis, 2003). Rationality and rational actions are praised by the stoics since reason makes people capable of making choices. Among these choices one can choose “stoical detachment and lack of emotion when facing the vicissitudes of the world” or can prefer to harm his soul with rage, jealousy, or grieving (Mitsis, 2003, p. 254). Seneca asserts that power of rationality guarantees happiness since it bestows inner freedom by leading the person to the right decision. Thus, the soul can be liberated from the passions.

Hamlet and Senecan Philosophy

Roman stoicism starts with Zeno (334-262 BC), and continues with Cleanthes (330-230 BC), Chrysippus (279-206 BC), Panaetius (185-109 BC), Posidonius (135-51 BC), and Seneca (4 BC-65 AD) flourishing through Rome and Greece as a popular Hellenistic philosophy among the learned elite. Stoic school explains that reason is the highest virtue and can be reached through self-control which is possible when one represses powerful feelings and avoids disruptive emotions. According to the stoic belief, indifference to pain and pleasure brings human beings closer to reason and thus, guarantees a happy life. For stoics, emotions are equal to judgements in the way that both are controllable. Hence, destructive emotions are the consequence of mistaken judgements (Sellars, 2006). “They are thus the consequence of poor reasoning ... so they should play no part in the life of a properly functioning rational being” (Sellars, 2006, p. 117). Therefore, repressing the potentially destructive emotions is a key to being rational.

Seneca (2010) explains in “On Anger” that anger is the most dangerous passion, and that it is equal to madness. It causes destruction since it has a potential to evoke the desire for revenge (p. 17). He further asserts that: “for no passion desires vengeance more earnestly than anger and for that very reason it's unsuited to take revenge: too hasty and witless like virtually every form of desire, it gets in its own way as it hurries toward its goal for that reason it has never done any good in either peace or war: it makes peace look like war” (p. 25). According to the stoic

teaching, one should get rid of earthly passions and ambitions to reach serenity, and make choices without the influences of those passions. Only in this way eternal blessing can be attained in both worlds. Similarly, Seneca recommends human beings to act with their reason because wisdom is the enemy of dangerous passions like anger. He presents delaying as the cure to anger and advises not to hasten but wait for it to cease its effect on the mind. Vengeance can be delayed by pretending not to take notice (Seneca, 2010). Therefore, it can be argued that Hamlet struggles to be a stoic hero in the play with his famous delay; however, he fails because he cannot control his passions, especially his anger which leads him to vengeance. When he first speaks to his father's ghost, he is inclined to follow the stoic advice. He does not rush and takes the stoic cure of delaying. Seneca asks in "On Anger", "Anyone willing to speak to you only in private might as well be mute: what is more unjust than to believe a tale told in secret, but to become angry for all to see?" (p. 55). Indeed, in Act 2 Scene 5, the Ghost leads Hamlet away from Horatio and Marcellus so that he could speak to him in private. Hamlet finds himself in the very position that Seneca describes. Here, it is advised not to believe in the stories and get caught up in rage that will result in violence. Hamlet follows this advice, too. He hesitates to believe in the ghost and does not engage in a violent action until he feels certain of his father's murder during the play which he calls the mouse trap. Even when he is certain after the play within the play, he still feels he should take an honest opinion on the matter from Horatio:

Hamlet: ... Didst perceive?

Horatio: Very well, my lord

Hamlet: Upon the talk of poisoning?

Horatio: I did very well note him. (3.2. 260-64)

Hamlet's long and calculated observations of Claudius alone will not suffice to arrive at a decision on Claudius's guilt. His observations are validated only after he gets confirmation from a trusted friend, Horatio. Horatio's confirmation of the suspicious acts of Claudius enables Hamlet to believe what the ghost of his father told him. Although, the fact that he does not seek revenge immediately after he talks to the Ghost shows us that he is able to act reasonably, in the same act, scene 4, he mistakenly kills Polonius thinking him to be Claudius. Still, Hamlet appears to be avoiding the stoic philosophy that bids the suppression of passion. This action

triggers a chain of events leading him to a duel with Laertes in the end, which will cause his own destruction as well as many others such as Ophelia, Laertes, and Gertrude on the way. Seneca (2010) describes anger as a way of showing weakness. He likens it to being drunk and adds that “those who are most inclined to anger are babies and the sick” (p. 26). Therefore, this act of weakness in the murder of Polonius symbolizes Hamlet’s failure to follow the stoic philosophy. Perhaps, Shakespeare presents the idea that it is not realistic to expect human beings to follow stoic advice because removing emotions is unnatural.

Hamlet’s analyses have often focused on Horatio’s personality as a pure stoic character (Hanson, 2011 and Campbel, 1930). These studies commonly hold that during the play Horatio observes how people are seized by their passions which lead them to disaster. As Hamlet’s confidant, he portrays a reliable personality, and he is not involved in the chaos the state is going through by symbolising the reason. He is purified of passion as it is seen in Hamlet’s statements:

Give me that man
That is not passion’s slave, and I will wear him
In my heart’s core, ay, in my heart of heart
As I do thee (3.2. 61-4).

Here, Hamlet defines a stoic man who does not serve passion and praises his ability to block his feelings. As Seneca (1969) emphasises in *Letters from A Stoic*, “the outcome of violent anger is a mental raving and therefore anger is to be avoided not for the sake of moderation but for the sake of sanity” (p. 69). It is true that Horatio preserves his sanity throughout the play. However, it is also true that he is not tested. He is not faced with a personal problem that would push him to feel. That is why Horatio represents the ideal while Hamlet is way more realistic with all his pain, rage and inner conflicts that make him human.

Schoff (1956) calls Hamlet as an “almost entirely a passive or ineffectual character” (p. 54). He also adds that “Hamlet's death provides the only moment in the play in which Horatio is subjected to such emotional pressure as Hamlet has been feeling most of the way through it. And, ironically for Horatio’s admirers, it is Horatio, not Hamlet, who under such pressure surrenders impetuously to the idea of self-slaughter” (p. 56). Hence, his self-control and

rationality are questionable. This point of view might be useful for questioning the practicality of being a stoic. Hamlet fails since he is just a human feeling helpless in front of an unfair murder, a disloyal mother, and a wicked uncle. Seneca's stoic advice to ignore the evil to block the rage seems pointless as Hamlet's speech illustrates:

Does it not, think thee, stand me now upon
He that hath kill'd my king and whor'd my mother
Popp'd in between th' election and my hopes.
Thrown out his angle for my proper life.
And with such a cozenage is 't not perfect conscience
To quit him with his arm? And is 't not to be damn'd,
To let this canker of our nature come
In further evil? (5.2. 62-70)

Hamlet asks a question that could have changed the course of events. He pours his heart honestly, seeking an honest opinion that might influence his later actions. He shows Horatio the signed document that bids his death upon his arrival in England. Yet, Horatio, completely indifferent, comments on the fate of Guildenstern and Rosencrantz referring to Claudius, without bothering to answer Hamlet's question:

It must be shortly known to him from England
What is the issue of the business there. (5.2.71-2)

As it appears in his lines above, Horatio, the happy stoic, cannot provide a rational answer for Hamlet. He cannot even advise him to procrastinate or ignore what has happened. Instead, he avoids the question and pretends that he has not heard it. This shows that the stoic philosophy fails to provide answers for serious problems. Hence, it may be argued that Shakespeare might be pointing out the stoic philosophy's shortcomings in practice. Horatio has many titles such as the scholar, companion, friend and confidant but he is not the adviser that guides Hamlet with his teaching. This quality of Horatio's character is discussed by Kettle (1960), who points out that "from beginning to end he is a wandering ineptitude who has never a single question and whose speech mainly of "Ay, my lords", "That is most certain", "Is it possible?" and other helpful

phrases... and this is the strong silent man after whom Hamlet should have modelled himself” (p. 72). As it is apparent in Kettle’s statement, Horatio is the depiction of a stoic who accomplishes to stay indifferent to the external world. He manages to stick to his teaching by not showing any sign of strong emotion or passion throughout the play. However, this makes him rather useless, almost a faint character who is alive, yet, with no friend. It appears that he does not ask questions and is not capable of answering any. The *summum bonum* of the stoic appears very individualistic here, obviously it does not stand for communal good.

Shakespeare depicts Horatio as a man who, to use Horace’s words, “neither lends or borrows”. Horace (65-8 BC) was widely influential during the early Renaissance and his expressions became proverbial among the Elizabethans who turned to *carpe diem* (live the moment), *nil desperandum* (never despair) and *beatus ille* which refers to escaping from turmoil of the world and finding tranquillity while enjoying liberty. In Horace’s poem, *Beatus Ille*, Horace imagines a land with free people stating that “Happy the man free of business cares / Who neither lends or borrows” (1-2). According to Bate (2019), the idea of *beatus ille* is especially used by Shakespeare, appearing in a number of his plays (149-150). Bate mentions Titus from *Titus Andronicus*, giving the scene where Titus tells his banished son that “how happy art thou then / from these devourers to be banished” (3.1:56-7). For the sake of augmenting the examples, the king in his soliloquy in *Henry IV Part II* utters that: “Then happy low, lie down! / Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown” (3.1. 30-1). These lines reflect the aspiration for *beatus ille* while being weary from the heavy burden of the responsibilities. Indeed, considering *beatus ille*, Lear is more famous than any other Shakespearean kings in his quest to reach comfort away from the court since he divides his land among his daughters “To shake all cares and business from our age, / Conferring them on younger strengths” (1.1. 34-5). Regarding Hamlet, *beatus ille* is represented by the previous location of the prince where he is away from the distress of the court. However, his father’s death interrupts Hamlet’s studies and forces him to abandon his peaceful environment to return to the troublesome life of the court. Unfortunately for him, the wedding replaces the funeral when he arrives in Denmark which creates a shock for the young prince. Once he enters the court, his mind is captured by passions and exposed to the burst of emotions

such as disappointment, rage, jealousy, and anger. By returning to Denmark he leaves his Horatian idyll, where he could have found happiness dealing with his studies.

Horatio sticks to his reason to stay away from the chaos for his own interests because he has barely provided assistance or guidance for any. Hamlet could have stayed in his *beatus ille* and acted reasonably for his own good. Horatio's virtue is enough to keep him alive and to survive as the narrator of Hamlet's story that in fact suits him as an outsider. Wilson emphasises that "Horatio is even, just, measured, passive and detached if not cold and indifferent. If Horatio is supposed to be Hamlet's best friend, therefore, he is the kind of friend who is 'just there', and he is 'just there' nearly silent and a yes-man for Hamlet in contrast to the friends who actually try to help Hamlet like Rosencrantz, Guildenstern and Ophelia" (202-3). However, it is worth mentioning that he is the one who first tells Hamlet about the Ghost. He is a trusted scholar in the eyes of Hamlet and others that makes the ghost story believable. From this perspective, the dialogue below becomes a turning point for the tragedy:

My lord, I think I saw him yesternight.

Saw who?

My lord, the King your father.

The King my father?

Season your admiration for a while

With an attent ear ... (1.2. 189-194)

Horatio is also the one who shows the ghost to Hamlet with his call: "Look my lord, it comes!" (1.4. 38). His statement and the two soldiers', Marcellus and Barnardo's testimony are enough to convince him of the existence of a supernatural being. Here, it is obvious that Horatio has considerable power on Hamlet. Therefore, he takes it seriously when he hears the ghost commanding him to take revenge:

O, horrible, O, horrible, most horrible!

If thou hast nature in thee, bear it not,

Let not the royal bed of Denmark be

A couch for luxury and damned incest (1.5. 80-83)

Upon his arrival at her mother's wedding when he was expecting a funeral, Hamlet has already suspected that something unnatural happened in the court. Hearing this serious accusation, Hamlet takes the stoic cure with his famous delay instead of taking revenge, thus postpones his action. He struggles with his doubts until he sees his uncle's reaction while watching *The Murder of Gonzago* the play which he "used as a sort of lie detector test on those intent on concealing guilt" (Phillips & Megna, 2019, p. 2). When he unveils, as he believes, the guilt after Claudius breaks off the play, he has no reason to wait anymore. As Ghose (2019) points out, the uncle's reaction might as well indicate that he is alarmed by a threat coming from his nephew and interrupts the play as a reaction. Nevertheless, Hamlet does not give credit to this possibility. His suspicions about his father's murder are removed by the end of the play and he cannot further delay his passions. Besides, rational Horatio does not bother to warn him about this possibility.

In Hamlet's decision to finally act, the renaissance understanding of tragedy also plays a significant role. In his *The Defence of Poesy*, Sir Philip Sidney states that tragedy "openeth the greatest wounds, and showeth forth the ulcers that are covered with tissue" (qtd. in Ghose, 2019, p. 31). He explains that tragedy has a power to reveal secret sins and misdoings. Then, Sidney narrates the story of Alexander Phraeus from Plutarch's *Life of Pelopidas*, a cruel murderer and tyrant, who burst into tears and needs to leave the performance when watching Euripides's *Trojan Women*, fearing that people see him weeping since they have never witnessed his pity and compassion. The grief and suffering of the Trojans must arouse pity in someone who enjoys burying people alive (Ghose, 2019, p. 31). Considering Plutarch's story, it appears that tragedy moved Alexander and Claudius in a similar way judging from their reactions to the scenes that might have included some parallels from their pasts. Again, considering Hamlet's final decision and action to kill Claudius after the play within the play, it can be argued that the tragedy might have influenced him, too. Until the players show him an identical scene, he has incubated and dreamed about his father's murder based on the Ghost's story. Once he sees the betrayal vividly in front of his eyes, he understands that he cannot delay his revenge any longer, as he did throughout the play. Thus, once more it is seen that Hamlet shows human reactions and his quest to be a stoic remains unaccomplished. While Horatio's indifference and unconcern turns him into a shadowy being, Hamlet's dilemmas and passion make him realistic, proving that stoic

teachings are impractical. Hamlet's stoicism appears to be much more calculated than that of Horatio's even though he cannot preserve this until the very end.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Hamlet's delay in seeking revenge against King Claudius can be seen as a characteristic of a Renaissance man who values reason and intellect. His thoughtful and contemplative nature, his scepticism, moral dilemmas, and the need for certainty all align with the intellectual and philosophical currents of the Renaissance period. Hamlet's ultimate decision to take action is not solely based on reason but also stems from his humanity, and in this moment, he ceases to be a stoic, embracing his emotions and his duty to his father's memory. However, it is also important to acknowledge that Hamlet's delay is multifaceted and influenced by various factors, including his emotional turmoil and the complexities of the Danish court. Shakespeare's portrayal of Hamlet's character allows for diverse interpretations, and his hesitation remains a compelling aspect of the play that continues to resonate with audiences and scholars alike.

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