Stoicism Scrapped: Intersections between Seneca's *Phaedra* and Vergil's *Georgics*

A Silver Age poet and philosopher, Seneca the Younger wrote drama not only based on Greek tragedy but also interwoven with allusions to literary giants such as Vergil, Ovid, and Catullus. Previous scholarship sees this intertextuality either as Seneca's excuse for the horrors of his tragedies (Schiesaro 63), a "game of literary one-upmanship" (Gahan 122), or a nod to the poetic truths of the Golden Age greats (Maguinness 86). Yet none of these explanations provides a satisfactory reading of the play's widespread intersections with Vergil's *Georgics*, allusions varying from single words to entire episodes, intimately bound up with Seneca's drama. Throughout the play, Phaedra and her stepson Hippolytus use the *Georgics* differently, manipulating Vergil's text to advance their own agendas. Seneca, then, borrows from a Stoic author, Vergil, and employs his characters as mouthpieces to display the abandonment of Stoicism within the genre of tragedy through two different perspectives.

As Phaedra and her nurse argue about her passion for her stepson, Phaedra first alludes to Vergil's *Georgics* by twisting upside down Vergil's simile (*Georg*. I. 199–203) of a man stoically rowing upstream (*Ph*. 178–85). In the lines *furor cogit sequi / peiora. Vadit animus in praeceps* (*Ph*. 178–79), Seneca casts *furor* as the driving force and *animus* as its antithesis, instead of the fate that controls Vergil's simile, setting up a contrast that runs throughout the rest of the play. Most importantly, these lines show that Seneca's hero gives up instead of pushing onwards, an outcome echoed in the words *frustra* (*Ph*. 180), and *in vanum* (*Ph*. 182). The conclusion of this simile, *Vicit ac regnat furor* (*Ph*. 184), unequivocally shows the triumph of the illogical power of love over Stoic rationality.

Immediately after this discussion, the chorus sings about love's power (*Ph*. 338–57), synthesizing Vergil's catalogue of love's sway over wild beasts (*Georg*. 242–83). The vocabulary and the syntax of the chorus' song closely mirror Vergil's passage, as it moves from the *aper* (*Ph*. 348, *Georg*. III.247), the *tigris* (*Ph*. 345, *Georg*. III.247), and the *cervi* (*Ph*. 342, *Georg*. III.265), concluding with rhetorical questions (*Ph*. 356, *Georg*. III.265) and a reference to evil stepmothers (*Ph*. 356–57, *Georg*. III. 282–83). Not only does Seneca condense Vergil's passage for a more striking effect, but he also subverts the reader's expectation in his allusion to Vergil's *noverca* by referring to Phaedra, no longer *saeva* but in love with her own stepson (*Ph*. 365–57, *Georg*. III.281–83).

The next allusion similarly reverses expectations as Phaedra fashions herself as a stallion from Vergil's *Georgics* in her confession of love to Hippolytus, echoing Vergil's vocabulary with *rupesque* (*Ph*. 700–01, *Georg*. III.253–54). Not only does Phaedra cast herself in the active, male role in these lines, but this portrayal of herself also suggests that Hippolytus cannot control her—as mares, not stallions, were used in chariot racing—and foreshadows Hippolytus' death, torn to pieces by runaway horses.

Instead of emphasizing love's power, Hippolytus' use of Vergil's *Georgics* downplays it by focusing on the Golden Age, echoing Vergil's *tellus…nullo poscente* with *arva…poscentes nihil* (*Ph.* 486, 537–38; *Georg*. II.495–96, I. 127–28). Neither borrowing vocabulary nor reworking passages, Hippolytus' scattered allusions fall flat compared with Phaedra's and the chorus'; by championing a bygone era, Hippolytus inadvertently explores the failure of his own philosophy, Stoicism.

Right after Hippolytus' allusions, the chorus uses of the word *currus* as metonymy for "horses," a use that appears first in Latin at the end of the first *Georgic* in

a description of a charioteer losing control over his horses (*Ph.* 787, *Georg*. I. 512–14). This unusual use of *currus* again emphasizes Hippolytus' lack of control over events and alludes to his downfall. Similarly, in the messenger's description of Hippolytus' death, Seneca again borrows Vergil's vocabulary with *torto…verbere* (*Ph*. 1076–77), but he inverts Vergil's passage on horses winning a chariot race (*Georg*. III.106–07) to describe Hippolytus' dash to his death.

Every allusion thus far has subtly worked together to describe the abandonment of Stoic ideas, whether explicitly or indirectly. Through the opposing characters of Phaedra and Hippolytus, as well as through the chorus' and the messenger's input, the stoic Seneca explores his philosophy's failure to stand up in the face of overwhelming passion within the context of tragedy, just as Vergil did within his didactic epic.

Bibliography

Gahan, John T. "'Imitatio and aemulatio' in Seneca's 'Phaedra.'" *Latomus* 46 (1987):380–387. *JSTOR*. Web. 02 Apr. 2014

Maguinness, W. S. "Seneca and the Poets." *Hermathena* 88 (1956): 81–98. *JSTOR*. Web. 02 Apr. 2014.

Schiesaro, Alessandro. "Forms of Senecan Intertextuality." *Vergilius* 38 (1992): 56 63. *JSTOR*. Web. 02 Apr. 2014.

Seneca. *Phaedra*. Ed. Michael Coffey and Roland Mayer. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1990.