



Seneca and the Idea of Tragedy

Gregory A. Staley

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As both a literary genre and a view of life, tragedy has from the very beginning spurred a dialogue between poetry and philosophy. Plato famously banned tragedians from his ideal community because he believed that their representations of vicious behavior could deform minds. Aristotle set out to answer Platos objections, arguing that fiction offers a faithful image of the truth and that it promotes emotional health through the mechanism of catharsis. Aristotles definition of tragedy actually had its greatest impact not on Greek tragedy itself but on later Latin literature, beginning with the tragedies of the Roman poet and Stoic philosopher Seneca (4 BC - AD 65). Scholarship over the last fifty years, however, has increasingly sought to identify in Senecas prose writings a Platonic poetics which is antagonistic toward tragedy and which might therefore explain why Senecas plays seem so often to present the failure of Stoicism. As Gregory Staley argues in this book, when Senecan tragedy fails to stage virtue we should see in this not the failure of Stoicism but a Stoic conception of tragedy as the right vehicle for imaging Senecas familiar world of madmen and fools. Senecan tragedy enacts Aristotles conception of the genre as a vivid image of the truth and treats tragedy as a natural venue in which to explore the human soul. Staleys reading of Senecas plays draws on current scholarship about Stoicism as well as on the writings of Renaissance authors like Sir Philip Sidney, who borrowed from Seneca the word idea to designate what we would now label as a theory of tragedy. Seneca and the Idea of Tragedy will appeal broadly to students and scholars of classics, ancient philosophy, and English literature.

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