

HEAVEN, HELL, AND THE EARTH: INFANTICIDE IN SENECA'S *HERCULES*

by

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ABSTRACT: The methodology used in the paper combines the traditional philological method of text analysis with methods of interpretation of the object relations school of psychoanalysis. My focus is on the images of self and other expressed in characters' interactions as well as in poetic metaphors and similes. In the paper I describe several crucial self and object patterns of relationship that are intertwined in various ways. Through the analysis of conflicted self and object relationships, the central conflict of the play is determined as a conflict between two images of emotional dependence. Infanticide, as the dramatic climax of the play, is understood as an attempt to symbolically destroy the children and their mother, who stand for conflicted dependence patterns. The resolution, however, is not a liberation from the struggle between love and hate, but turns out to be another expression of painful dependence, depicted through Hercules' suffering towards the end of the play. The poetic dynamics of Hercules' madness seem to come very close to certain psychoanalytic theories of the narcissistic personality structure. Ultimately, in this play Seneca seems to criticize certain forms of pseudo-Stoicism by showing a caricature of the Stoic sage.

INTRODUCTION

Despite the fact that the corpus of ten tragedies ascribed to Seneca had a great impact on Renaissance drama and Western tragedy in general¹, in the first half of the 20th century Seneca was not considered by critics to be a great Latin poet. A good example of the dominant view was that of Thomas S. ELIOT, expressed in his essay concerning Elizabethan translations of Senecan tragedies. Having summed up the contemporary criticism of Senecan drama (empty, declamatory rhetoric, the lack of dramatic qualities), he concluded that "the tragedies of Seneca deserve the censure that has been directed upon them"².

ELIOT did not consider Senecan tragedies to be completely worthless, but he believed that their "un-dramatic" quality was a proof that they were composed only for private declamation³ and that in those tragedies:

¹ Cf. CUNLIFFE 1893; LUCAS 1922; BOYLE 2009.

² ELIOT 1966: 67.

³ Cf. KOHN 2012; ZANOBI 2014.