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Storm Imagery in Senecan Poetry and Prose

By Allison Letica

The image of a storm, daunting and disorderly by nature, is a common and widely used literary theme. Its various aspects combine to form a complex and multiform figure: the dueling winds drive the cresting waves as the thundering lightning slices through the striking rain. In Seneca’s vast body of work, this storm imagery appears in both his prose and poetry, or more precisely, in his essays, letters, and tragedies alike. In each investigation of the storm, whether direct or through metaphor, Seneca reveals particular aspects of the imagery and how it relates to his view of human nature and the mind. The context within which Seneca frames his works adds a larger dimension to his use of this imagery, placing the passages within the greater Stoic philosophy. In this way, Seneca not only uses storm imagery as a direct comparison for aspects of human nature, but also expresses his Stoic ideals through this figure.

As storm imagery appears throughout the body of Seneca’s work, it is necessary to examine both poetry and prose in order to fully comprehend its role. In De Tranquillitate Animi and De Ira, Book III, Seneca uses prose to explore human nature in relation to turbulence and tempests. Reflective of the thoughts in both of these works, the tragedy Medea explores the role of the tempest in the representation of anger and uncertainty. While more opaque than direct comparisons, Seneca’s descriptions of storms, in particular in the tragedy Agamemnon, shed light on the greater role of storms in Senecan theory. Particular passages within each of these works comprise a reservoir of imagery,
with which Seneca pursues the idea of the Stoic self in which the individual is connected to the greater cosmic world. Further, as the rage of the storm stands for human anger and the confusion for human wavering and uncertainty, his storm metaphor comes to be a converse figure of the ideal Stoic self.

In the context of Seneca’s work, the trope of the storm is reflective of his style, interests and values. Firstly, Seneca’s use of metaphorical language fits into the broader category of his use of exempla. The metaphor of the storm is one of many figures that Seneca uses to represent ideals in a less overtly didactic, and, as he himself claims, more effective manner. As Shadi Bartsch argues, Seneca’s metaphors are not ornamental, but rather contain “cognitive content” that “maps onto theory in a way that enables the listener to grasp an abstract concept via an experience familiar to him or familiar to the world he lives in.”

The storm metaphor provides a contrast rather than a direct correlation to Stoic values, emphasizing Seneca’s inclination toward discussion of vices and negativity. Irrespective of what the image of the storm might precisely imply in his work, the very theme of nature is critical to the Senecan and Stoic tradition. For Seneca, nature-inspired metaphors are particularly striking because of his apparent fascination with nature. His Quaestiones Naturales, comprised of seven books that each attempt to explain natural phenomena, is the ultimate demonstration of his interest in physics, or the study of nature. As one of the three main Stoic studies, this topic of physics and the idea of living in accordance with Nature and one’s own nature are crucial to the greater context of Seneca’s work. In these ways, the imagery of the storm is not a mere isolated metaphor, but rather a figure that intertwines itself into both Senecan theory.

and style.

The significant role of the storm metaphor is enhanced by the preliminary examination of storm imagery in Seneca’s works. While the *Quaestiones Naturales* offer explanations of phenomena, including precipitation (Book IV) and winds (Book V), the bulk of vivid storm imagery is located in Seneca’s other works, especially his poetry. In his tragedy *Agamemnon*, Seneca depicts a scene of a storm rolling onto the sea toward the forthcoming disaster of the Greek fleet returning from the Trojan War. It is worth noting here, and in many other circumstances, that the notion of the storm is inextricably connected to that of the sea, combining to form the image of a sea-storm. In this particular work, Eurybates, the messenger of Agamemnon, recounts the sea-storm that few but Agamemnon have survived, with vivid detail:

Then a grave murmur, threatening worse things, falls from the highest hills, and the shore and the crags groan with a long drag; the wave, agitated by the coming winds, swells (*agitata ventis unda venturis tumet*)...dense fog buries the darkness, and with all light led away, the sound and sky mix. From every direction simultaneously, they (the winds) press against and seize the sea, turned over from its deepest bottom, West wind against East, South wind against North. Each sends its own weapons and the disturbed winds exert themselves on the water; a whirlwind swirls the sea (*sua quisque mittunt tela et infesti fretum/emoliuntur; turbo convoluit mare*): Styrmonian Aquilo whirs the lofty snow and Libyan Auster puts the sands in motion, as does Syrtes, which does not remain against Auster; Notus, made heavy with clouds, enlarges the waves with rain; Eurus, shaking
Nabatean kingdoms and the curves of dawn, disturbs the morning sun…He has torn the whole world from its bases…the surge resists the wind and the wind revolves the surge backward; the sea does not take hold of itself, and rain mixes waves and their tides (uento resistit aestus et uentus retro/aestum revoluit; non capit sese mare:/undasque miscent imber et fluctus suas). (Seneca Agamemnon III.466-89)

The language in this passage depicts the storm as violent, aggressive and chaotic. In his portrayal of the winds in a duel, Seneca expresses these main features of his figure. With their tela, the winds are violent and aggressive in the sense that they are personified as actively fighting one another. In his usage of words such as infesti and convoluit, Seneca expresses a sense of confusion in the dueling. The repeated use of forms of misceo in this storm scene also heightens the feel of disorder. Both violence and confusion exude from the imagery of the surge and wind pushing against one another at the end of the passage. While these features will be extremely significant in the context of the storm metaphor, the passage is significant in other ways as well. Seneca shows the cohesiveness of his body of work by using the various names of the winds, thereby linking this scene to his long discussion of winds in Quaestiones Naturales, Book V. Such links enable the reader of his works to have a complete comprehension of his treatment of storm imagery across his poetry and prose. This isolated passage, however, while perhaps lacking metaphorical meaning in itself, can be taken as a metaphor in the context of the entire tragedy. As it appears fairly early in the work, the storm scene, which depicts past disaster, also foreshadows the coming downfall.

48 Translations are my own throughout the paper.
of Agamemnon at the hands of Clytemnestra. Therefore, the storm could come to symbolize the forthcoming rage of Clytemnestra that leads to the slaughter of Agamemnon. While this particular theme is not necessarily consistent with the rest of the discussion, it is important to note the emergence of the storm as a metaphor, even in an unlikely context.

In contrast to the embedded meaning in Seneca’s imagery are his direct comparisons involving storms in the form of similes and metaphors. In examining several of these instances, a thematic trend emerges in the metaphor that follows the themes discussed in the language of Seneca’s storm imagery. Rather than standing for a single emotional state, the storm metaphor has two key facets: one in which the rage and violence of the tempest stands for human anger and another in which the confusion of the storm represents human wavering and uncertainty.

With the former side of the metaphor, Seneca closely links the storm to anger, one of his most disdained vices. Similar to his usage of storm imagery, the storm as a metaphor for human wrath appears across his poetry and prose. Strikingly, in the very same work as the vivid storm scene appears, the storm is personified as containing anger and violence in such examples as “the raging sea” (insanum mare) (Sen. Ag. III.540) and simply furor (III.577). Even in his work on anger, De Ira, Seneca first uses this method of personification when he depicts the “storm raging” (tempestas ...desaevit) (Sen. Ira III.1.1). Through these instances and many others, the link between the storm and the concept of anger is permanently drawn. While the technique of personifying the storm with human emotion is representative of the overall theme, it is not nearly as effective as the direct comparisons. When discussing the ways in which anger differs from other passions at the beginning of De Ira, Book
III, Seneca proclaims:

Etiam si resistere contra adfectus suos non licet, at certe adfectibus ipsis licet stare: haec, non secus quam fulmina procellaeque et si qua alia inrevocabilia sunt quia non eunt sed cadunt, vim suam magis ac magis tendit. (III.1.4)

Even if a man is not able to halt his own passions, his passions themselves, however, can certainly stand still: this (anger) extends its strength more and more, like lightening and storms and all other things that are irrevocable because they do not go, but fall.

In this direct comparison, Seneca equates anger with a storm in terms of its uncontrollable intensity. He depicts anger as a unique emotional state in that it inexorably builds until it crashes, rather than ceasing, as other passions might. Instead of using the standard term *tempestas*, Seneca opts for more descriptive terms in this passage, namely *fulmina* and *procella*, thereby increasing the vividness of the simile. This depiction of anger as a storm that intensifies without bound reveals a reason behind Seneca’s contempt for anger. Out of all passions, anger is the most uncontrollable and unpredictable, as a storm. Accordingly, Norman T. Pratt emphasizes that the sea-storm is used “to describe insane passion,” with “language of unrestraint.”49 As a Stoic, Seneca strives for consistency and moderation, values that cannot coexist with this image of anger as a raging tempest which seems to be Seneca’s most apt *exemplum*.

The complementary side of the metaphor, in which the storm represents uncertainty, emerges primarily through the prose of *De Tranquillitate Animi*. Seneca, a proponent of the

calm mind, describes the uncertain mind as having a thousand waves or fluctuations (*mille fluctus mentis incertae*) (Sen. *Tranq.* XI.10). While in this case Seneca does not directly portray a storm, his usage of the term *fluctus* is certainly suggestive of the sea imagery that is present in much of his storm description. Further, Seneca insists that many storms will inflict those who are inconsistent and wavering in that they do not focus on one path (*non potest umquam tanta varietas et iniquitas casuum ita depelli, ut non multum procellarum irruat magna armamenta pandentibus*) (IX.3). In such a way, Seneca imagines the storm (*procella*) as a metaphor for the consequence of human uncertainty, again linking the two ideas. Near the end of the work, Seneca utilizes the image of the storm in a positive context—a rare occurrence in the scheme of his works. While describing the tranquility of Canus as he prepares himself for death, Seneca states, “Behold tranquility in the midst of a storm (*ecce in media tempestate tranquillitas*)” (XIV.10). Once again, Seneca uses the storm metaphorically to portray emotional turmoil, through which Canus remains calm. As Canus’ state of mind is the antithesis of the state of a storm, Seneca is giving Canus the ultimate praise. This statement stands in stark contrast with most of Seneca’s storm imagery, in which the storm is used solely to represent vices, through his two-sided metaphor.

The two components of the metaphor in conjunction with one another emerge through passages in Seneca’s *Medea*. Both the nurse and Medea herself refer to Medea’s crazed, unstable and angry state with storm imagery. The nurse, fretting about the unpredictable nature of Medea’s forthcoming actions, wonders:

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haeret minatur aestuat queritur gemit.
quo pondus animi verget? ubi ponet minas?
ubi se iste fluctus franget? exundat furor.
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She sits fast, threatens, rages, laments, moans. Where will the weight of her mind bend? Where will she place her threats? Where will that wave break itself? Her fury overflows.

Using the imagery of turbulent water and waves, Seneca combines Medea’s anger and uncertainty into one powerful image. The waves, *fluctus*, are not only depicted as destructive, like anger, but also as uncertain since the nurse wonders *ubi* the waves will break. Turbulent waves in their very nature are wavering, unpredictable and free-flowing. Seneca, again writing with Stoic ideals, looks down upon this inconsistency or uncertainty at the same time as he looks down on anger. Later, Medea portrays her emotional state with the same characteristics: the themes of anger and uncertainty flood from one strong simile:

...anceps aestus incertam rapit;  
ut saeva rapidi bella cum venti gerunt,  
utrimque fluctus maria discordes agunt  
dubiumque fervet pelagus, haud aliter meum  
cor fluctuatur: ira pietatem fugat  
iramque pietas. (V.939-4)

A two-headed surge seizes me, uncertain; just as when the rapid winds wage savage wars, and the discordant waves drive the sea on both sides and the fluctuating sea rages, not otherwise my heart fluctuates: anger puts love to flight and love makes anger flee.

Seneca again employs the image of a sea-storm, yet here he uses the most direct comparison in the form of a simile. As in the discussion of the initial storm description, the winds are portrayed as violent and dueling, as they wage war (*bella... gerunt*) against one another. Further, the three words *dubiumque fervet pelagus* synthesize the two key aspects of
the metaphor: the sea is uncertain and fluctuating as it rages. In the latter part of the simile, Medea directly addresses this fluctuation of her heart, between anger, the vice, and love, the virtue. While uncertainty does play a crucial role, it is important to remember that Medea’s anger is ultimately the victor of her internal battle. In other words, the storm imagery does primarily represent uncertainty in this passage, but as Medea’s fluctuations cease and her anger takes the reign, the image of the storm can cycle back to represent her wrath.

This complex metaphor, with two separate components, becomes particularly cohesive when one considers its function in the broader Senecan theory. As Gareth Williams states:

Just as the whirlwinds and other forces of nature can bring chaos to the ordinary cycle of things, so the implication is that Seneca’s human whirlwinds are themselves “natural” deviants, the ordinary workings of the human/social (Stoic) ratio overthrown by the excesses of these occasional but (experience tells us) inevitable transgressors.  

The way in which Williams depicts Seneca’s imagery of storm, in particular the whirlwind, suggests that the meaning of the metaphor does not necessarily rely on the specific emotions that are implied; rather, the very fact that winds are chaotic in their nature reflects on human nature which deviates from Stoic ideals in an often-chaotic manner. Thus, though anger and uncertainty are crucial as specific themes that emerge from Seneca’s storm imagery, as a whole, the trope can merely be taken to represent the deviant nature of a non-Stoic mind. Seneca himself offers a kind of all-encompassing storm analogy in De Ira, Book III:

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Nullum est argumentum magnitudinis certius quam nihil posse quo instigeris accidere. Pars superior mundi et ordinator ac propinqua sideribus nec in nubem cogitur nec in tempestatem inpellitur nec versatur in turbinem; Omni tumultu caret: inferioura fulminantur. Eodem modo sublimis animus, quietus semper et in statione tranquilla conlocatus, omnia infra se premens quibus ira contrahitur, modestus et venerabilis est et dispositus. (Sen. Ira. VI.1)

There is no evidence of greatness more certain than when there is nothing that can happen by which you are incited. The superior part of the world, both more orderly and near to the stars, is neither driven together into a cloud, nor pushed into a storm, nor turned into a whirlwind; it lacks all turmoil; the lower parts are flashed with lightening. In the same manner the sublime mind, always calm and stationed in a tranquil standing, pressing below itself all things from which anger is collected, is modest and venerable and put together.

Here Seneca offers the ultimate analogy of the human mind to the concept of storms: just as the upper atmosphere is free from disturbance in the form of storms and winds, the ideal Stoic mind, lofty and great, is free from deviants such as anger, wavering, and uncertainty. As in all his work, Seneca follows through with his Stoic philosophy, including “projecting personal emotion into a cosmic frame,”51 as stated by Charles Segal. By equating the mind to the atmosphere, Seneca achieves this traditionally Stoic connection of the self to the universe. More importantly in the context of this

discussion, Seneca provides us with a synthesis of his various storm imagery, scattered throughout his works and across his pages: he fashions the figure of the storm into the antithesis of the ideal Stoic mind.

References
Miller, F.J., trans, Agamemnon, Theoi Classical E-Texts Library.

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