

# Hibrit Trajedi Olarak Robert Greene'in the Tragical Reign of Selimus Adlı Oyunu

## The Tragical Reign of Selimus as a Hybrid Tragedy

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### ÖZET

Bu makale, Robert Greene'in *The Tragical Reign of Selimus* (1594) adlı eserini, tarihî, Senecacı ve Elizabeth dönemi dramatik geleneklerini sentezleyen öncü bir melez trajedi olarak yeniden değerlendirir. Metne yakın okuma yöntemiyle yapılan inceleme, Greene'in Osmanlı tarihinin siyasi entrikalarını Seneca tarzı intikam ve şiddet temalarıyla harmanlarken, Elizabeth dönemi tiyatrosunun psikolojik derinlik ve ahlaki karmaşıklık gibi yenilikçi unsurlarına nasıl yer verdiğini ortaya koyar. Oyunun başkahramanı Selimus, bu sentezin somutlaşmış halidir: İktidara Makyavelist yükselişi, Sultan I. Selim'in tarihî vakayinamelerini yansıtır; acımasız hırsı, Seneca trajedilerindeki furor (çılgın öfke) ile örtüşür; içe dönük monologları ise Elizabeth döneminin insan zaaflarını keşfetme arayışıyla uyumludur. Greene, Osmanlı coğrafyasının egzotik atmosferini, despotizmi ve hırsı kınamak için kullanırken modern izleyiciyi de cezbetmeyi başarır. Makale, Selimus'un erken modern dönem tiyatrosunun uyum yeteneğini örneklediğini savunur: Eser, klasik retorik, tarihsel alegori ve yenilikçi karakter incelemelerini birleştirerek iktidarın yozlaştırıcı doğasını sorgular. Bu melez yapı, yalnızca oyunun tematik yankısını—denetimsiz otoritenin döngüsel şiddetini açığa çıkararak—zenginleştirmekle kalmaz, aynı zamanda geç Orta Çağ ahlak oyunları ile Rönesans trajedisi arasında köprü kuran bir geçiş eseri olarak konumlandırılır. Nihayetinde Selimus, Elizabeth dönemi tiyatrosunun küresel siyaset ve liderliğin ahlaki belirsizliklerine duyduğu ilgiyi yansıtan, gözden kaçmış ancak kritik bir katkı olarak öne çıkar.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Selimus, Robert Greene, Melez Trajedi, Elizabeth Dönemi Tiyatrosu, Seneca Etkisi

### ABSTRACT

This essay re-evaluates Robert Greene's *The Tragical Reign of Selimus* (1594) as a pioneering hybrid tragedy that synthesizes historical, Senecan, and Elizabethan dramatic traditions. Through close textual analysis, the study demonstrates how Greene interweaves the political intrigue of Ottoman history with Senecan motifs of vengeance and spectacle, while engaging emergent Elizabethan conventions of psychological depth and moral complexity. The play's protagonist, Selimus, embodies this fusion: his Machiavellian ascent to power reflects historical chronicles of Sultan Selim I, his ruthless ambition channels Senecan furor, and his introspective soliloquies align with Elizabethan explorations of human frailty. Greene uses the Ottoman setting's exoticism to condemn despotism and ambition while captivating modern viewers. The essay argues that Selimus exemplifies early modern drama's adaptability, merging classical rhetoric, historical allegory, and innovative character studies to interrogate power's corrupting nature. This hybridity not only enriches the play's thematic resonance—revealing the cyclical violence of unchecked authority—but also positions it as a transitional work bridging late medieval morality traditions and Renaissance tragic forms. Ultimately, Selimus emerges as a vital, if overlooked, contribution to Elizabethan theatre, reflecting the era's fascination with global politics and the moral ambiguities of leadership.

**Keywords:** Selimus, Robert Greene, Hybrid Tragedy, Elizabethan Drama, Senecan Influence.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

### 1.1. Robert Greene and His Work

Robert Greene (1558-1592) was a prominent English playwright, poet, and pamphleteer during the late Elizabethan era. Known for his vibrant and often scandalous life, Greene is remembered as one of the first professional writers in England. His diverse body of work spans prose, poetry, and drama, reflecting the dynamic and often tumultuous cultural landscape of his time.

Greene was born in Norwich, Norfolk, and was baptized on July 11, 1558 (Vitkus, 2000, p. 21). He attended Cambridge University, where he earned his Bachelor of Arts in 1578 and his Master of Arts in 1583. Greene's time at Cambridge was marked by a blend of academic rigor and a penchant

for the bohemian lifestyle, foreshadowing his later life in London. As Ed Simon aptly puts it, Greene was the first Bohemian (Simon, 2016). After completing his studies, he travelled extensively through Italy and Spain, experiences that would later enrich his writing with a continental flair. Greene's literary career began in earnest upon his return to England, where he settled in London. He quickly became known for his prolific output and his colourful personality. His works span various genres, including romantic comedies, pastoral poems, and city comedies, each reflecting different aspects of Elizabethan society.

One of Greene's most significant contributions to literature is his series of prose pamphlets (Jones, 2024), which blend fiction and autobiography. These pamphlets, such as "Greene's Groats-Worth of Wit" (1592) and "The Repentance of Robert Greene" (1592), offer a candid and often self-critical view of his life and the literary world. "Greene's Groats-Worth of Wit," published posthumously, famously includes one of the earliest known references to William Shakespeare, whom Greene derisively calls an "upstart crow" (Simon, 2016). In addition to his prose, Greene was a notable dramatist. His plays often explore themes of love, betrayal, and social ambition, infused with rich characterizations and intricate plots. Some of his well-known plays include *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay* (1589), a romantic comedy interwoven with elements of magic and science, and *James IV* (1591), a historical play that delves into themes of loyalty and kingship.

*The Tragical Reign of Selimus* (1594) stands out as a significant work in Greene's dramatic oeuvre, though its authorship is occasionally disputed (Vitkus, 2000; Greene, 1898). The play is a tragedy that narrates the rise and fall of Selimus, an ambitious and ruthless ruler of the Ottoman Empire. It explores themes of power, ambition, and moral corruption, reflecting Greene's ability to weave complex human emotions into his narratives. The play's exploration of a non-European setting and its depiction of political machinations provide a rich tapestry of intrigue and drama, characteristic of Greene's style.

Greene's works had a lasting impact on the English literary tradition. His ability to blend classical influences with contemporary issues helped to shape the development of Elizabethan drama and prose. Despite his relatively short life, Greene's prolific output and his vivid portrayal of Elizabethan society have cemented his place in literary history. His candid reflections on the literary world of his time offer invaluable insights into the challenges and triumphs of a professional writer in the Renaissance era. In summary, Robert Greene was a multifaceted writer whose works spanned various genres and themes. His contributions to Elizabethan literature, both in prose and drama, reflect the complexities of his time and his own personal struggles and ambitions. Through his vivid storytelling and keen observations, Greene's legacy endures as a testament to the rich tapestry of Renaissance literature.

## 1.2. Overview of *The Tragical Reign of Selimus*

*The Tragical Reign of Selimus* is a tragedy by Robert Greene, first published in 1594. The play offers a dramatic exploration of ambition, power, and corruption within the context of the Ottoman Empire, reflecting both the historical and exotic appeal that fascinated Elizabethan audiences. "Selimus is the earliest play extant to be based entirely within the bounds of the Ottoman Empire and to be primarily concerned with Ottoman dynastic history." (Dimmock, 2016, p. 170) The play follows the turbulent reign of Selimus, a ruthless and ambitious Sultan of the Ottoman Empire. The narrative unfolds in a series of dramatic events that highlight Selimus's ascent to power and the subsequent moral and political decay that accompanies his rule.

Central to the play is the corrosive power of unchecked ambition. Selimus' relentless pursuit of power propels him down a treacherous path of corruption and betrayal, ultimately revealing the moral decay inherent in unchecked authority. This toxic fusion of ambition and power breeds a cyclical pattern of revenge, as characters seek retribution for perceived wrongs, intensifying the play's exploration of violence and its devastating consequences. The intricate political machinations of the

Ottoman court serve as a fertile ground for these destructive forces, highlighting the fragility of power.

Selimus's brother, Acomat, who also has a great lust for power (Şahiner, 2008, p. 140), emerges as a secondary yet equally tyrannical figure. Like Selimus, Acomat is consumed by ambition and power. His character serves as a foil to Selimus, highlighting the corrosive effects of unchecked desire. Acomat's ruthlessness and cunning contribute to the overall atmosphere of intrigue and violence in the play. The dynamic between the two brothers, characterized by a toxic combination of rivalry and dependence, further deepens the exploration of power dynamics and the destructive consequences of unrestricted ambition.

The play's exploration of the complex interplay between power, morality, and psychology within a historical framework ultimately reveals the enduring power of tragedy to illuminate the human experience. The play's exotic setting in the Ottoman Empire adds a layer of intrigue and fascination, appealing to Elizabethan audiences with its portrayal of a distant and mysterious culture. The historical context, though dramatized, serves to heighten the play's dramatic impact and explore universal themes of power and ambition.

Selimus defies easy categorization as a singular tragic form, instead emerging as a complex hybrid drawing upon elements from Historical, Senecan, and Elizabethan tragedy. Its historical setting and exploration of political power align it with historical tragedy, while its emphasis on violent spectacle and moral decay echoes Senecan drama. Simultaneously, the psychological depth of its characters and the exploration of their internal conflicts align with Elizabethan tragic conventions. This multifaceted approach creates a potent and disturbing dramatic experience. By blending historical context with the dramatic conventions of Seneca's revenge tragedy, including the exploration of themes such as ambition, corruption, and retribution, and incorporating the structural and thematic features of Elizabethan drama, Greene crafts a narrative that offers profound insights into the human condition. The play's exploration of the complex interplay between power, morality, and psychology within a historical framework ultimately reveals the enduring power of tragedy to illuminate the human experience. The exotic Ottoman setting enhances the play's dramatic impact, appealing to Elizabethan audiences with its portrayal of a distant and mysterious culture.

## **2. ELEMENTS OF HISTORICAL TRAGEDY IN *THE TRAGICAL REIGN OF SELIMUS***

The Ottoman Empire was a formidable force in the early modern era, dominating vast regions of southeastern Europe, the Middle East, and North Africa. Its influence was deeply woven into the fabric of European history. A vital player on the world stage, the empire provided Europe with valuable goods and captured the imaginations of travellers and their audiences alike (Baer, 2021).

Selimus integrates historical tragedy elements by drawing from the historical context of the Ottoman Empire, blending real historical figures with dramatic embellishment to craft narrative rich in historical significance and dramatic intrigue. The play situates itself within the context of the late 16th century, in which "the Ottoman Empire long struck fear into European hearts" (Tongo & Schick, 2019). The depiction of the Ottoman Empire in the play is not merely a backdrop but a crucial element that shapes the narrative and thematic concerns.

The central figure, Selimus, is based on the historical Sultan Selim I, who reigned from 1512 to 1520. Selim I was known for his military conquests and his expansion of the Ottoman Empire, making him a prominent and formidable figure in both historical and dramatic terms. In Selimus, Greene takes liberties with Selim's historical persona, dramatizing his ambition and cruelty to enhance the tragic dimensions of his character. This portrayal aligns with the play's exploration of the corrupting influence of power and the destructive nature of uncontrolled ambition.

Other historical figures are similarly depicted with a blend of accuracy and dramatic license. The play includes characters such as Bajazet, Selimus's brothers Corcut and Acomat who represent

the internal conflicts and power struggles within the Ottoman dynasty. This depiction highlights the brutal and treacherous nature of Ottoman court politics, reflecting both historical realities and the play's dramatic needs.

Greene's representation of the Ottoman Empire serves as more than just a historical setting; it acts as a mirror to explore the themes of tyranny, betrayal, and moral decay. By incorporating real historical figures and situating them within a narrative of power struggles and personal ambition, Selimus engages with historical events while using dramatic techniques to enhance the thematic depth of the tragedy.

The historical context of the Ottoman Empire also provides a frame for examining the broader themes of empire and governance, resonating with contemporary concerns about the nature of power and its impact on individuals and societies. Through this fusion of historical and dramatic elements, Greene's play not only reflects the historical period in which it was written but also engages with timeless themes of human ambition and its consequences.

Robert Greene vividly portrays the intense dynastic struggles and familial conflicts endemic to the Ottoman court, underscoring their destructive impact on both individuals and the state. Selimus's ruthless ambition is evident in his explicit rejection of traditional values in favour of tyranny. He declares, "manifest the heat of thy desire" and "nourish the coals of thine ambitious fire" (Greene, 1898, pp. 9-10), revealing a Machiavellian determination to seize power at any cost. His conviction that "thy Empire is most sure / When men for fear thy tyranny endure (Greene, 1898, pp. 9-10) further illustrates the toxic relationship between ambition, power, and terror. Greene's depiction of the Ottoman court as a crucible of political intrigue and familial strife serves as a microcosm of the corrosive effects of unbridled ambition.

The play's central conflict revolves around the ruthless struggle for succession following the Ottoman Emperor's demise. Selimus, an ambitious and ruthless protagonist, is locked in a bitter power struggle with his brother Acomat and father Bajazet, for control of the throne. This fraternal rivalry mirrors the historical tensions within the Ottoman dynasty, notorious for succession disputes characterized by intrigue, betrayal, and violence. The play's exploration of these themes is poignantly encapsulated by Bajazet's words: "Hear me, Mustaffa and Cherseoli. / I am a father of a headstrong brood; / Which, if I look not closely to myself, / Will seek to ruinate their father's State; / Even as the vipers in great Nero's fen / Ate up the belly that first nourish'd them" (Greene, 1898, p. 6).

The depiction of this conflict underscores the brutal and treacherous nature of the power struggle. Greene vividly dramatizes Selimus's manipulative and violent tactics against Bajazet, exposing the destructive potential of such rivalries. The personal animosity between the brothers serves as a microcosm of the broader political conflict, highlighting how familial discord can escalate into widespread devastation. Selimus's character embodies the ruthless ambition often associated with power-hungry leaders, as exemplified by his own words:

Now Selimus, consider who thou art; / Long hast thou marched in disguis'd attire, /  
But now unmask thyself, and play thy part, / And manifest the heat of thy desire;  
/ Nourish the coals of thine ambitious fire; / And think that then thy Empire is most sure,  
/ When men for fear thy tyranny endure, / Think, that to thee there is no worse  
reproach." (Greene, 1898, pp. 9-10).

The play explores the complex world of political intrigue and ambition through its intricate portrayal of court politics. Greene skilfully employs dramatic techniques to expose the cunning and manipulation inherent in the pursuit of power. Selimus' ascent to the throne is marked by a series of strategic alliances, betrayals, and calculated manoeuvres designed to eliminate rivals and solidify his authority. Bajazet's perspective on Selimus's duplicity is poignantly expressed:

Even as the great Egyptian crocodile / Wanting his prey, with artificial tears, / And feigned complaints, his subtle tongue doth file, / T' entrap the silly wandering traveller, / And move him to advance his footing near; / That when he is in danger of his claws, / He may devour him with his famished jaws: / So playeth crafty Selimus with me (Greene, 1898, p. 17).

Greene's depiction of political ambition also serves to amplify the tragic dimensions of the narrative. The relentless pursuit of power leads to personal and political downfall, reflecting the broader theme of ambition's destructive potential. The play's portrayal of the treacherous nature of Ottoman court politics serves as a commentary on the broader implications of unchecked ambition and the moral compromises that often accompany the quest for power. In summary, Selimus vividly captures the political intrigue and power struggles of the Ottoman court, using these elements to explore themes of ambition, betrayal, and the destructive impact of familial and political conflict. Greene's dramatization of these aspects not only reflects historical realities but also enhances the play's tragic dimensions, making it a rich and multifaceted exploration of political power.

### 3. ELEMENTS OF SENECA TRAGEDY IN *THE TRAGICAL REIGN OF SELIMUS*

Selimus embodies the Senecan tradition of tragedy through its intense portrayal of violence and bloodshed. Greene's play is marked by scenes of graphic brutality, reflecting the influence of Seneca's tragedies, which are renowned for their depictions of violent actions and tragic suffering. As noted by Staley, "the plays [Senecan plays] are filled with characters who either suffer intense pain or inflict it" (Staley, 1975, p. 2). This is evident in Greene's portrayal of the brutality that characterizes Selimus's pursuit of power and revenge. Selimus vividly illustrates this relentless pursuit by declaring that one should nourish the coals of their ambitious fire and believe their empire is most secure when men endure their tyranny out of fear. He asserts that there is no worse reproach for someone in such a high position than filial duty. He believes that one ought to set barrels of blood flowing and seek to displace whole kingdoms with the sword (p. 10).

Throughout the play, Greene emphasizes the physical and emotional violence that permeates the characters' lives. Instances of brutality include the brutal executions and the bloody conflict between Selimus and his rivals. For example, Selimus himself declares, "I will not take my rest, till this right hand / Hath pull'd the crown from off his coward's head, / And on the ground his bastard's gore-blood shed" (p. 21). This explicit imagery underscores the depth of violence that defines Selimus's quest for supremacy.

The violence depicted in Selimus serves multiple purposes. It illustrates the extreme nature of the characters' ambitions and the lengths to which they will go to achieve their goals. Selimus's ruthless ambition is evident in his statement, "Is not sufficient to support a crown; / Then Selimus, take thou it in his stead; / And if at this thy boldness he dare frown, / but resist thy will, then pull him down" (Greene, 1898, pp. 10-11). This relentless drive for power leads to a cycle of violence that is central to the play's dramatic impact.

Additionally, the graphic depiction of bloodshed enhances the play's tragic impact, underscoring the destructive consequences of excessive ambition and revenge. This is reflected in the character of Acomat, who asserts, "A thousand ways can Acomat soon find, / To gain my will; which if I cannot gain, / Then purple blood my angry hands shall stain" (p. 51). Such expressions of violence and the quest for vengeance are integral to the play's exploration of themes such as power, revenge, and the moral consequences of violence.

"The confrontation of sage and tyrant, the true and false king, is exploited to rhetorical effect in the philosophical tradition" (Littlewood, 2004). Revenge emerges as a central theme in Selimus, intricately woven into the play's narrative and character motivations. This theme drives much of the action, reflecting the Senecan preoccupation with the cycle of retribution and the moral complexities

of seeking vengeance (Slaney, 2016, p. 93). In *Selimus*, the pursuit of revenge is not merely a personal vendetta but a profound force that shapes the characters' destinies, leading them into a vortex of violence and moral decay.

The character of *Selimus* embodies the relentless pursuit of revenge. Determined to avenge perceived wrongs against his father, *Bajazet*, and other enemies, *Selimus* drives the drama forward. His ambition is evident in his declaration that he will not rest until he has pulled the crown from his enemy's head and shed their bastard's blood (p. 21). This chilling vow underscores his unwavering resolve to achieve his goals at any cost.

*Bajazet's* reflections on his troubled state underscore the severity of the conflicts ignited by revenge. He laments the numerous dangers he has endured, claiming they would terrify even the most steadfast heart (pp. 2-3). This sense of constant threat and turmoil is exacerbated by his sons' ambitions, particularly *Selimus's*. *Bajazet* recognizes the destructive potential within his own family, stating, "Ah! that our sons thus to ambition thrall, / Should set the law of Nature all at nought!" (p. 5). His fears are justified when he considers *Selimus's* treacherous actions: "Can it not be? Oh yes, *Cherseoli*; / For *Selimus's* hands do itch to have the crown" (p. 8). *Selimus's* desire for power drives him to betray his father, leading to further violence and suffering.

The play also explores the theme of revenge through *Selimus's* interactions with other characters. *Acomat*, another ambitious son, harbours his own vengeful intentions. He declares, "Thus will I rend the crown from off thy head, / False-hearted and injurious *Bajazet*" (p. 40) and is willing to commit heinous acts to achieve his aims. *Acomat's* pursuit of revenge extends beyond his father, demonstrating the destructive nature of vengeance as he resolves to "quench those kindled flames with his heart's blood" (p. 41) and is willing to kill his own kin to secure his position.

*Selimus's* view of revenge is further illuminated by his reflections on the nature of power and justice. He cynically remarks, "In Death's void kingdom reigns eternal Night; / Secure of evil, and secure of foes" (p. 14), suggesting that even in death, the cycle of vengeance might leave him unfulfilled. This is mirrored in his readiness to commit patricide: "If I resolve? as sure as heaven is heaven, / I mean to see him dead, or myself king" (p. 16). His ruthless ambition is evident in his contempt for traditional values, as he declares, "Tush *Sinam*! these are school conditions, / To fear the devil or his cursed dam" (p. 16).

The destructive nature of revenge is further highlighted by *Bajazet's* realization that *Selimus's* ambition will lead to his downfall. He compares *Selimus* to a "great Egyptian crocodile" who uses deceit to entrap his prey, symbolizing the treachery that pervades the play (p. 17). This treachery results in further violence, as illustrated when *Acomat* seeks to demonstrate his dominance: "A thousand ways can *Acomat* soon find, / To gain my will; which if I cannot gain, / Then purple blood my angry hands shall stain" (p. 51).

*Selimus* uses the theme of revenge to explore the destructive power of personal grudges and the moral consequences of seeking retribution. Through its portrayal of relentless violence and suffering, the play critiques the cycle of vengeance and its impact on both individuals and society, offering a profound commentary on the nature of justice and the human cost of ambition.

The rhetorical style in *Selimus* is heavily influenced by Senecan tragedy, characterized by its elevated and elaborate language. Greene employs a heightened rhetorical style that emphasizes the emotional and psychological states of the characters, contributing to the play's dramatic intensity. As Lucas puts it, "the whole burden is thrown upon the language" (Lucas, 2009, p. 57). "The reason why English stage is affected by Senecan tragedies is its profound dependence on language and affiliation with figures of speech" (Şafak, 2014, p. 530). The use of rhetorical devices, such as soliloquies and elaborate speeches, allows characters to express their inner conflicts and motivations in a way that

amplifies the tragic elements of the narrative. This style is reflective of the Senecan tradition, where rhetoric is used to explore themes of power, revenge, and moral ambiguity.

Bajazet in *Selimus* speaks with the weight of Senecan rhetoric, revealing his inner turmoil and foreboding:

[...] That may descry the cause of thy unrest,  
Unless these walls thy secret thoughts declare:" (p. 1).  
Since when, what dangers I have over-past,  
Would make a heart of adamant aghast.  
The Persian Sophi, mighty Ismael  
Took the Levant clean away from me;" (pp. 2-3)

He laments his losses and foresees further strife within his family:

"Now all these are but foreign damages/ Taken in war, whose die uncertain is;  
But I shall have more home-borne outrages, Unless my divination aims amiss.  
I have three sons all of unequal ages, And all in diverse studies set their bliss. Corcut  
my eldest, a Philosopher; Acomat pompous, Selim, a warrior; Corcut in fair Magnesia  
leads his life  
In learning Arts, and Mahound's dreaded laws" (p. 4)

Selimus reveals his ruthless ambition by embracing a Machiavellian philosophy. He believes that the security of his empire is best ensured when his subjects endure his tyranny out of fear. He considers that there is no greater shame for him than adhering to filial duty in such a high position of power. Instead, he thinks he should unleash bloodshed and use violence to overthrow entire kingdoms. Selimus articulates his ruthless philosophy of power:

"Think'st thou I care for apparitions, Of Sisiphus and of his backward stone, And poor  
Ixion's lamentable moan? Or, if there were, as I can scarce believe, A heaven of joy,  
and hell of endless pain; Yet by my soul it never should me grieve, So I might on the  
Turkish empire reign, To enter hell, and leave fair heaven's gain An Empire, Sinam,  
is so sweet a thing, As I could be a devil to be a King." (p. 17)

The elaborate language and soliloquies in *Selimus* not only reveal character motivations but also serve to enhance the dramatic tension and explore the complex themes of ambition, power, and morality. This rhetorical style, rich in emotional and psychological depth, underscores the tragic elements of the play and aligns with the Senecan tradition that deeply influenced English Renaissance drama.

Key monologues in *Selimus* are instrumental in uncovering the characters' motivations and internal struggles, providing a profound insight into their psychological states. Greene's use of soliloquies allows for a deep dive into the characters' desires, fears, and moral dilemmas, revealing their complex motivations and the tragic dimensions of their actions.

Selimus's monologues are crucial in understanding his character as a tragic figure driven by ambition and moral corruption. His soliloquies reveal his relentless pursuit of revenge and his readiness to resort to extreme measures to achieve his goals. For instance, Selimus declares with chilling resolve, "I will not take my rest, till this right hand / Hath pull'd the crown from off his coward's head, / And on the ground his bastard's gore-blood shed" (p. 21). This statement underscores his deep-seated ambition and willingness to commit patricide to secure his power.

Selimus cynically dismisses fears of the supernatural, claiming that such beliefs are merely childish (p. 16). This reflects his moral detachment and single-minded pursuit of power. He articulates a ruthless determination to attain his ambitions, unequivocally revealing his readiness to adopt tyrannical rule: “Avaunt such glasses! let them view in me, / The perfect picture of right tyranny” (p. 11).

Bajazet’s monologues provide insight into his fear and sense of betrayal. His reflections reveal the emotional toll of his sons’ ambitions and the treachery he perceives within his own family. He laments the threats he faces, noting, “Since when, what dangers I have over-past, / Would make a heart of adamant aghast” (pp. 2-3). This quote illustrates the profound impact of the ongoing conflict and betrayal on his psyche. Bajazet’s monologues also express his disillusionment and anger toward his sons, particularly Selimus. He perceives Selimus as a traitor who seeks to undermine him, stating, “Can it not be? Oh yes, Cherseoli; / For Selimus’ hands do itch to have the crown” (p. 8). This rhetorical expression of his despair highlights the personal betrayal he feels and the destructive ambition driving his sons.

The monologues of other court figures contribute to the exploration of themes such as power and betrayal. For example, Acomat’s monologues reveal his ruthless intentions and desire for revenge against his father, Bajazet. He expresses his willingness to commit horrific acts to achieve his goals, declaring, “Thus will I rend the crown from off thy head, / False-hearted and injurious Bajazet” (p. 40). His resolve to use violence and betrayal to secure his position aligns with the play’s broader themes of ambition and revenge.

Similarly, the character of Mahomet reflects on the destructive potential of Acomat’s ambitions, noting, “You know he is displeas’d with Bajazet, / And will rebel as Selim did to fore” (p. 42). This insight adds depth to the portrayal of ambition and its consequences, underscoring the cyclical nature of violence and revenge in the play.

The monologues in Selimus offer a deep exploration of character motivations and thematic elements. Through Greene’s use of soliloquies, we gain insight into the inner turmoil of characters like Selimus and Bajazet, as well as the broader themes of power, betrayal, and violence. The heightened rhetorical language and dramatic effect of these speeches reflect the enduring influence of Seneca’s tragic tradition, enhancing the play’s exploration of tragic themes and its overall dramatic impact.

#### **4. ELEMENTS OF ELIZABETHAN TRAGEDY IN *THE TRAGICAL REIGN OF SELIMUS***

Selimus, attributed to Robert Greene, is a quintessential example of Elizabethan drama, immersing the audience in a rich tapestry of historical and political intrigue. Centered on the life and conflicts of the historical figure Selimus, the narrative is rife with power struggles, dynastic tensions, and the corrupting influence of ambition. This historical backdrop serves as a crucible for exploring the destructive consequences of tyrannical rule.

Elizabethan audiences, accustomed to the brutality of public executions, likely found stage violence less shocking (Bowers, 1966, p. 16). A central theme in Elizabethan drama is the exploration of ambition and its destructive consequences, poignantly portrayed through the character of Selimus. The Elizabethan period, marked by intense political machinations and social upheaval, saw playwrights delve into the darker aspects of human nature, particularly the corrosive effects of ambition. Selimus embodies unchecked ambition, an archetype resonating with the broader cultural and political anxieties of the time.

Selimus’ ambition is not merely a desire for power but an all-consuming force that dictates his actions and decisions. His ruthless pursuit of authority is evident from the outset, as he casts aside any semblance of morality or filial duty to achieve his goals. This ruthless ambition is illustrated by his view of power, where he asserts that the true essence of kingship lies in being feared and reviled

rather than in the virtues of humility or justice: “The surest ground for kings to build upon, / Is to be fear’d and curs’d of every one” (p. 52)

In the play, Selimus reflects on his identity and his relentless drive for power. The imagery of “marching in disguis’d attire” suggests a period of concealment and strategic planning, akin to the Machiavellian tactics often depicted in Elizabethan drama. The call to “unmask thyself” (p. 9) signifies a pivotal moment where Selimus fully embraces his ambition, shedding any pretences and revealing his true nature. The metaphor of nourishing “the coals of thine ambitious fire” (p. 9) vividly illustrates how his ambition burns within him, demanding to be fed and inevitably consuming everything in its path.

The destructive consequences of Selimus’ ambition are manifold. His actions lead to betrayal, murder, and the destabilization of the state, reflecting the catastrophic impact of a leader whose aspirations are unchecked by ethical considerations. This aligns with the Elizabethan dramatic tradition, which according to Harish (2000) frequently portrayed ambitious characters who, in their quest for power, brought about their own downfall and the suffering of those around them (Harish, 2000). Moreover, Selimus’ character can be seen as a critique of the political landscape of the Elizabethan era, where the pursuit of power often led to treachery and moral compromise. By dramatizing the extremes of ambition through Selimus, Greene provides a cautionary tale about the dangers of overreaching and the ethical decay that accompanies the unbridled quest for dominance.

The theme of ambition and its destructive consequences is a defining feature of Elizabethan drama, and Selimus offers a compelling exploration of this motif. Selimus’ embodiment of ruthless ambition serves as a powerful reminder of the perils of allowing one’s desire for power to overshadow moral integrity and human compassion. Through his character, the play underscores the timeless warning against the corrupting influence of ambition, a lesson as relevant in Greene’s time as it is today.

Elizabethan drama often features multifaceted characters with psychological depth, reflecting the period’s fascination with the complexities of human nature and the moral ambiguities inherent in power and ambition (Mahavidyalaya, 2024). Selimus, the titular character in the play, exemplifies this intricate characterization. He is portrayed as a complex figure, driven by a relentless ambition that eclipses any sense of filial duty or moral restraint. This complexity is vividly captured in his own reflections on the nature of power and duty. “In many an Elizabethan play the action of an energetic will to a considerable degree accounts for the presence of protagonists who, for better or worse, are among the most arresting characters in all dramatic literature” (Gassner, 1967, p. xv).

Selimus explicitly rejects the conventional Elizabethan values of loyalty and obedience to family, highlighting his radical departure from traditional norms. His declaration underscores a key aspect of his psychological makeup: an unwavering belief that filial duty is incompatible with his aspirations for supreme authority. This reveals a character whose ambition overrides all other considerations, presenting a psychological portrait of a man consumed by his desire for power.

The psychological depth of Selimus is further emphasized by his willingness to employ tyranny and cruelty to achieve his ends. Unlike more straightforward villains, Selimus embodies a nuanced form of ambition that is both self-aware and strategically brutal. He recognizes the necessity of shedding any vestiges of familial loyalty to assert his dominance, a recognition that adds layers to his character and aligns with the Elizabethan fascination with the darker aspects of human nature.

This chilling proclamation underscores Selimus’ readiness to eradicate even his closest kin to secure his position of power, highlighting his tyrannical disposition. His calculated cruelty is not driven by mere impulsiveness but by a deliberate and self-aware strategy to eliminate any potential threats to his authority. This ruthless approach to power and the psychological intricacies involved in

his decision-making process contribute to the rich, multifaceted portrayal of his character, illustrating the Elizabethan drama's deep engagement with the complexities of ambition and moral corruption.

Elizabethan drama, with its rich exploration of character motivations and ethical dilemmas, often delved into the internal conflicts of its protagonists. Selimus' internal monologue and his overt disdain for filial duty provide insight into his complex psyche. His ruthless ambition is not merely a characteristic but a driving force that shapes his actions and decisions, making him a compelling study in the psychological consequences of unchecked power. Moreover, the depiction of Selimus as a multifaceted character reflects the Elizabethan playwrights' interest in presenting morally ambiguous figures. Selimus' rejection of filial duty and his embrace of tyranny challenge the audience to grapple with the ethical implications of his ambition. This complexity is emblematic of the period's dramatic works, which often presented characters who straddled the line between heroism and villainy, thereby engaging the audience in a deeper contemplation of human nature. So, the psychological depth and multifaceted characterization of Selimus exemplify the rich character portrayals typical of Elizabethan drama. Selimus is not merely an ambitious tyrant but a complex figure whose rejection of filial duty and embrace of tyranny provide a profound exploration of the destructive potential of ambition. This nuanced portrayal invites the audience to consider the broader ethical and psychological implications of power, making Selimus a quintessential example of the sophisticated character studies that define Elizabethan theatrical tradition.

The play raises profound moral and philosophical questions, particularly about the nature of power, legitimacy, and the human condition. Selimus' rejection of religious and ethical norms serves as a focal point for these concerns. By dismissing religion as a mere construct designed to maintain social order, Selimus challenges the foundational beliefs that underpin the society around him. His assertion, "So that religion, of itself a bauble, Was only found to make us peaceable" (p. 13), underscores his cynical view of religion as a tool for control rather than a genuine source of moral guidance.

This rejection of established norms forces the audience to confront the implications of a world where traditional ethical frameworks are discarded. Selimus' stance prompts a revaluation of the role that religion and morality play in legitimizing power and governing human behaviour. The philosophical questions raised by Selimus' actions and beliefs resonate with the Elizabethan era's broader existential inquiries, reflecting the period's engagement with themes of authority, legitimacy, and the intrinsic nature of humanity.

Moreover, Selimus' perspective on religion and ethics reveals his deeper existential struggle and his quest for absolute power unbound by any moral constraints. This portrayal of a ruler who views ethical considerations as impediments to his ambitions adds a layer of complexity to his character, highlighting the tension between personal desire and societal norms. The play both entertains and provokes, challenging audiences to confront the destructive potential of unchecked ambition and the fragility of morality in a world dominated by power.

Soliloquies and asides are prevalent in Elizabethan drama, providing crucial insight into characters' inner thoughts and motivations. These dramatic techniques allow audiences to engage more deeply with the psychological complexity of the characters, as they articulate their desires, fears, and moral conflicts directly to the audience. In the play, Selimus frequently reveals his ambitions and strategic plans through soliloquies, offering a window into his ruthless and calculating nature. His soliloquies are particularly revealing, as they expose the depth of his ambition and his unyielding determination to achieve power at any cost.

For instance, in one soliloquy, Selimus declares his intent to seize control and establish himself as a king: "Well, if I chance but once to get the deck, To deal about and shuffle as I would; Let Selim never see the daylight spring, Unless I shuffle out myself a king" (pp. 57-58). This passage not only underscores his relentless ambition but also his willingness to manipulate and subvert

established order to fulfil his aspirations. The imagery of “shuffling” and “dealing” with the deck of cards metaphorically reflects his view of power as a game to be won through cunning and strategic moves, further emphasizing his Machiavellian approach to leadership.

This moment of introspection highlights the internal conflict between his concealed ambitions and his outward persona, ultimately leading him to pursue power unapologetically (pp. 9-10). Selimus speaks to himself with a sense of self-awareness and resolve, urging himself to cast aside any pretence and fully embrace his ambitious nature. This moment of introspection highlights the internal conflict between his concealed ambitions and his outward persona, ultimately leading to his decision to pursue power unapologetically.

These soliloquies are instrumental in depicting Selimus as a multifaceted character whose psychological depth is revealed through his own words. They align with the Elizabethan fascination with the human psyche and the moral ambiguities of power and ambition. By allowing the audience to hear Selimus’ unfiltered thoughts, the play provides a richer understanding of his motivations and the broader themes of ambition, legitimacy, and ethical boundaries that define Elizabethan drama. Thus, through soliloquies, Selimus not only advances its narrative but also deepens the audience’s engagement with its central character’s complex inner world.

“ Despite some lip service to classic example, the ruling spirit of the Elizabethan stage was notably romantic, manifesting itself in a flair for action, adventure, and violence even in the midst of the highest literary intentions” (Gassner, 1967, p. xiii). Selimus is replete with violence and Machiavellian intrigue, exemplifying the brutal and cunning nature of political power. Following the Elizabethan dramatic tradition of exploring ruthless strategies and moral ambiguities, the play presents Selimus as a prototypical Machiavellian prince, willing to employ murder and treachery to secure his reign.

Selimus’ readiness to employ such brutal methods is starkly evident in his plot to poison his rivals: “This Jew with some intoxicated drink, Shall poison Bajazet and that blind lord” (p. 63). This line encapsulates his Machiavellian approach, where deceit and treachery are tools to eliminate obstacles. The calculated nature of his plan reveals his strategic mind and cold-blooded determination, characteristics that align him with the archetypal Machiavellian villain. His use of an intermediary to carry out the poisoning also reflects a common theme in Elizabethan drama, where indirect actions and manipulation are often preferred to open confrontation.

Selimus’ embrace of violence is systemic rather than sporadic, reflecting the play’s broader commentary on the corrupting nature of power. The turbulent Ottoman setting necessitates a ruler as ruthless as they are cunning, as Selimus himself acknowledges: “To gain a kingdom, what can be too dear? Though I might purchase it with loss of soul” (p. 66). This chilling admission underscores the play’s exploration of the moral compromises inherent in the pursuit of absolute power.

By portraying Selimus, the play exposes the depths of human depravity in the pursuit of power. The violence and Machiavellian tactics depicted are not merely sensational but serve to highlight the ethical dilemmas and existential questions that define the human condition. Selimus’ actions raise questions about the legitimacy of power obtained through such means and the inherent instability of a rule founded on treachery and bloodshed. Thus, Selimus uses the character of Selimus to explore the intersection of violence, ambition, and political strategy. By portraying a protagonist who embodies the extreme measures taken in the pursuit of power, the play offers a poignant reflection on the nature of leadership and the moral compromises it often entails. This exploration is quintessentially Elizabethan, reflecting the era’s preoccupation with the complexities of authority and the human psyche.

The heightened language of Selimus contributes significantly to its dramatic intensity. As exemplified in the vivid description, “In vain, now all his veins in venom steep’d / Break out in

blisters that will poison us, / We seek to give him an antidotus” (p. 18), the play employs metaphor and imagery to convey the corrosive effects of corruption. This potent language evokes a sense of moral and physical decay, suggesting the inevitable spread of corruption. Moreover, the rhetorical flourishes and rich imagery throughout the play elevate its exploration of central themes. The poetic language mirrors the characters’ grand ambitions and intense passions, enhancing the dramatic impact of their struggles. Such elevated diction aligns with Elizabethan expectations of drama as high art, while also imbuing the narrative with timelessness and universality. By magnifying the characters’ inner turmoil and the stakes of their conflicts, the play transcends its historical context and continues to resonate with contemporary audiences.

Furthermore, the poetic dialogue contributes to the play’s dramatic structure, providing moments of reflection and introspection that deepen the audience’s understanding of the characters and their motivations. The stylistic elegance of the language enhances the play’s emotional and intellectual appeal, making it a quintessential example of Elizabethan drama’s ability to blend poetic artistry with profound thematic exploration. In short, the elevated and poetic language in *Selimus* is a defining characteristic that enriches the narrative, heightens the emotional intensity, and underscores the play’s exploration of its central themes. This stylistic trait is a testament to the enduring power of Elizabethan drama to engage and move audiences through the beauty and potency of its language.

Greene’s *Selimus* offers a potent reflection of the Elizabethan era’s preoccupation with the legitimacy of rule and the complex interplay between power, morality, and ambition. The play’s central conflict, the tumultuous struggle for the Ottoman throne, serves as a microcosm of the broader political and philosophical debates of the time. *Selimus*, the ambitious prince, embodies the Machiavellian prince figure prevalent in Elizabethan drama. His ascent to power is marked by a ruthless disregard for traditional familial and moral bonds. His declaration, “If he be, lording, ‘tis not lady’s love But love of rule, and kingly sovereignty” (p. 8) encapsulates the cold, calculated nature of his ambition. This sentiment resonates with Elizabethan concerns about the extent to which a ruler’s actions should be constrained by morality.

The play also echoes the Elizabethan fascination with the divine right of kings. While not explicitly stated, the constant references to fate, destiny, and the will of the gods imply a belief in a higher order justifying rule. However, *Selimus*’ methods of attaining power challenge this notion, raising questions about whether the aim of gaining the throne can justify the means (treachery, murder). Furthermore, the play explores the theme of tyrannical rule. Acomat, *Selimus*’ brother, emerges as a particularly potent example of a despotic leader. His reign of terror highlights the dangers of unchecked power and the potential for rulers to become tyrants. This theme was particularly relevant in Elizabethan England, where the spectre of tyrannical rule was a constant concern.

The Tragedy and Reign of *Selimus* offers a rich tapestry of political and philosophical ideas that resonate with the Elizabethan era. By examining the complex character of *Selimus* and the brutal power struggles within the Ottoman court, Greene provides a compelling commentary on the nature of sovereignty, the morality of political action, and the dangers of unchecked ambition. While *Selimus* certainly exhibits qualities of a traditional tragic hero, a more nuanced interpretation might position him as a tragic anti-hero. This perspective acknowledges his ambition and ruthlessness, while also recognizing the complexities of his character and the morally ambiguous world he inhabits.

*Selimus*’s tragic flaw, hubris, is undeniable. His relentless pursuit of power eclipses his moral compass, leading to a series of morally questionable actions. However, unlike the noble tragic heroes of classical Greek drama, *Selimus* is a more complex figure. His motivations are often driven by a desire for survival rather than a purely selfish ambition. This complexity, coupled with the morally

ambiguous world of the Ottoman court, makes him a more resonant character for Elizabethan audiences.

The quotation, “Selimus: Thou, wretched Selimus, hast greatest need/ To ponder these things in thy secret thoughts” (p. 81), is a critical moment of self-awareness. It suggests a potential for redemption or a recognition of the consequences of his actions. However, this moment is fleeting, and Selimus is ultimately consumed by his ambition. Selimus exemplifies the core tenets of Elizabethan drama, from its thematic exploration of ambition and power to its employment of complex characters, elevated language, and dramatic conventions such as soliloquies and Machiavellian intrigue. The play stands as a testament to the period’s dramatic artistry and its enduring fascination with the complexities of the human psyche and the dynamics of political power.

## 5. CONCLUSION

*The Tragical Reign of Selimus* stands as a compelling testament to the innovative spirit of Elizabethan drama. By seamlessly blending historical, Senecan, and Elizabethan elements, the play transcends the confines of traditional tragedy, offering a multifaceted and engaging exploration of power, ambition, and the human condition.

The play’s integration of historical facts with dramatic storytelling creates a rich tapestry that both informs and enthralls. The dramatization of the Ottoman Empire’s political landscape and its key players provides a compelling historical backdrop, while the exploration of personal motivations and moral dilemmas through dramatic conventions adds depth and complexity to the narrative. This unique fusion of history and drama allows *Selimus* to resonate with audiences on multiple levels, engaging both intellect and emotion.

Furthermore, the play’s incorporation of Senecan elements, such as violence, revenge, and heightened rhetoric, intensifies its tragic impact. The play’s characters are complex and morally ambiguous, reflecting the psychological depth characteristic of Elizabethan drama. This combination of Senecan intensity and Elizabethan characterization creates a powerful dramatic experience that lingers in the mind of the audience.

*Selimus* is not merely a historical drama or a Senecan tragedy; it is a hybrid form that expands the boundaries of both genres. By challenging conventional expectations and offering a fresh perspective on tragic storytelling, the play demonstrates the enduring power of drama to explore timeless themes in innovative ways. Its significance lies not only in its historical context but also in its contribution to the evolution of the tragic genre, inspiring subsequent playwrights and enriching the literary landscape.

Ultimately, *Selimus* stands as a testament to the enduring power of storytelling. Through its masterful blend of history, drama, and character, the play continues to captivate audiences centuries after its creation, inviting fresh interpretations and deepening our understanding of the human condition.

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