# DRAMATIZING HISTORY

*spectatum veniunt, veniunt spectentur ut ipsae.*

(OVID *ARS AMATORIA* 1.99)

They come to see, they come that they themselves may be seen.

Ovid's jesting interpretation of the reasons why women attend the theatre illustrates how the audience itself provided as much "theatre" as the stage did.[1] But what if the barrier between actor and audience were removed in a production of a *fabula praetexta* or historical tragedy to reveal someone from the audience represented onstage, whether or not he is seated in the audience during performance? From a performance-criticism perspective, when offstage reality pervades dramatic reality, in the case of *praetextae,* reciprocity ensues, resulting in the semiotics of competing realities: one identifies "real" persons and events onstage, and conversely, one interprets persons and events from everyday life in relation to characters and dramatic situations from the theatre.[2] The dramatization of historical or contemporary events alters the perception of reality, both on and off the stage, and intentionally breaks down the separation between the stage and the audience (= nonillusory drama). The question becomes: is what we are viewing onstage "real"?

Since the *praetexta* presented events drawn from the audience's cultural history, both remote and contemporary, the result was a play whose dramatic format was drawn from tragedy but whose content was drawn from reality itself. The dramatic genres of tragedy and literary *praetextae* developed concurrently, which means that the developing definition and perception of theatre and metatheatre are equally intertwined.[3] This chapter considers the reciprocity of "realities" in the production of *praetextae* from a dramaturgical perspective: the dramatizing of history (the way dramatists reproduce or present reality onstage) and the staging of history (the effect on the audience of viewing reality onstage). The production of *praetextae* contributed to the recognition and perpetuation of theatricality offstage, in particular under the late Republic and early Empire, that further removes the barrier between stage and audience.





## THEATRICALITY OF HISTORY

The *fabula praetexta,* or historical drama in Roman dress, was so termed after the *praetexta,* the purple-bordered toga worn by magistrates and senators.[4] The term "historical drama" is misleading, however, since *praetextae* also include legendary and quasi-historical plays, which to contemporary Romans represented history, whether family or state, rather than fiction. *Praetextae* celebrated the careers of aristocratic men of state and were privately commissioned for private and/or public performance on a number of possible occasions: triumphs, funerals, votive games, temple inaugurations, and public festivals.[5] *Praetextae* were not bought by the aediles, as in the case of tragedies. These plays depended on the patronage of a very small number of statesmen who had poets in their circle of dependents. We cannot, therefore, attribute the small number of these plays to artistic failure. Nor can we gauge their popularity on the same scale as tragedy.[6] In no modern sense were these historical plays "national" simply because their subjects also formed part of Rome's "political" history. Roman history—in essence, the history of the city of Rome—was composed of aristocratic family anecdotes about the military and political activities of their ancestors that were simultaneously events in Rome's own history.[7] Aristocratic family celebrations and national commemoration, therefore, overlapped.

Naevius is credited with introducing literary *praetextae* at Rome, but his plays were most likely preceded by nonliterary forms of drama, including *praetextae.*[8] Prior to Naevius, we know of six Greek historical plays: Phrynicus' *Sack of Miletus* and *Phoenissae;* Aeschylus' *Persians;* Moschion's *Themistocles* and *Phereus;* and the anonymous *Gyges/Candaules* tragedy, whose date is insecure.[9]

La Penna divides *praetextae* into two groups: plays having to do with the early history and myth of Rome, and those having to do with contemporary aristocratic achievements.[10] Of all these plays, only frag-

ments exist, with the exception of the *Octavia,* which survives whole. The mythological/historical plays include the *Romulus sive Lupus* of Naevius;[11] the *Sabinae* of Ennius; the *Aeneadae sive Decius* of Accius, which enacted the self-sacrifice of Decius Mus at the Battle of Sentinum against the Samnites and Gauls in 295 B.C.E.; Accius' *Brutus,* written for D. Junius Brutus Callaicus for an unknown occasion, celebrating the expulsion of the Tarquins from Rome in 509 B.C.E.; the *Brutus* of Cassius Parmensis, apparently on the same theme; and the *Aeneas* by Pomponius Secundus.[12] These last two plays form a contrast to the contemporary and historical *praetextae* of Pseudo-Seneca's *Octavia* and Curiatus Maternus' *Cato* and *Domitius,* written much closer in time to their subjects than the Republican historical plays.

Plays about contemporary aristocratic achievements include Naevius' *Clastidium,* written to celebrate M. Claudius Marcellus' winning of the *spolia opima* over Vidumarus earlier in 222 B.C.E.; Ennius' *Ambracia,* written for M. Fulvius Nobilior in 187 B.C.E.; and the *Paullus* of Pacuvius, celebrating Aemilius Paullus' victory over King Perseus of Macedon at Pydna in 168 B.C.E. The *Paullus* was possibly staged in 160 B.C.E. at the funeral games of Paullus, together with Terence's *Adelphoe* and the second failed production of the *Hecyra.*[13] The last known Republican *praetexta* was the *Iter* or *Journey,* which was written by L. Cornelius Balbus in 43 B.C.E., but this play was never produced in Rome.

Ancient evidence concerning the definition of *praetextae* is complicated by the fact that few ancient sources actually witnessed the performance of such a play. The creation of the *praetexta* and native comedy, as Latin dramatic forms celebrating Roman deeds rather than Greek ones, was a source of literary pride for Horace (*Ars P.* 285–294), but he does not describe typical features of the plays or their production onstage:

*nil intemptatum nostri liquere poetae,*
*nec minimum meruere decus vestigia Graeca*
*ausi deserere et celebrare domestica facta,*
*vel qui praetextas vel qui docuere togatas.*

(ARS P. 285–288)

Our poets have left nothing untried
nor have they deserved the least praise for deserting Greek paths
and for celebrating native accomplishments,
whether they produce the historical drama or Roman comedy.





Cicero (*Fam.* 10.32) preserves a contemporary reaction to an actual performance of Balbus' *Iter* that I analyze from a semiotic perspective below, but he does not define typical features of the genre. Other notices are late and rely on dramatic texts for their information. The grammarian Diomedes, for example, writing his *Ars grammatica* in the late fourth century C.E., defines in a rather cursory note the difference between *praetextae* and tragedy in the following way:

> The first type is [presented] in togas, which are called *praetextatae,* in which the business of generals is conducted and affairs of state, and Roman kings and generals are brought onstage, in the dignity and high rank of the characters, just as in tragedies . . . the *togata praetextata* differs from tragedies, because in a tragedy, heroes are brought onstage, just as Pacuvius wrote tragedies under the names of heroes Orestes, Chryses, and names similar to these, Accius did the same; in the *praetextata,* however, Roman kings or generals are brought onstage, just as plays written on Brutus, Decius, or Marcellus.[14]

Diomedes states that the transactions of generals and public affairs were the themes of *praetextae,* seemingly without making a distinction between the plots of plays celebrating contemporary aristocratic achievements and mythological/historical plays. Furthermore, Diomedes writes that "the business of generals is conducted and affairs of state" are enacted onstage (*imperatorum negotia aguntur et publica*), but this could mean anything from the preparation for a battle to its conclusion, including its reenactment, as well the presentation of events of Roman/state interest (and of historic consequence). Diomedes' silence on differences in plot between tragedy and *praetextae* perhaps indicates that the format of *praetextae* was essentially similar to that of tragedies and therefore required no comment.

The main distinction that Diomedes draws between *praetextae* and tragedies is the presentation of characters—heroes in tragedies, like Orestes and Chryses, and kings and generals in *praetextae.* Of the plays he lists, the king Tarquin appears in Accius' *Brutus* with the first consul L. Junius Brutus. In the *Decius* (transmitted to us with the title *Aeneadae sive Decius*), the consul and general Decius Mus appears, while M. Claudius Marcellus appears in Naevius' *Marcellus* (*Clastidium*). Other plays not listed by Diomedes in which aristocrats may appear as characters include Ennius' *Ambracia,* with the likely appearance of a character portraying M. Fulvius Nobilior, and Pacuvius' *Paullus* (but it is unclear from the fragments whether Aemilius Paullus appeared as a

character onstage). Tarquin and Brutus may have appeared in Cassius Parmensis' *Brutus.* Plays in which kings appear that are also absent from Diomedes' list include Romulus in Naevius' *Romulus sive Lupus* and Ennius' *Sabinae,* and Aeneas in Pomponius Secundus' *Aeneas.* In Pseudo-Seneca's *Octavia,* Nero, the ghost of Agrippina, and Octavia appear. Diomedes emphasizes the dignified depiction of kings and generals in *praetextae,* which points to an encomiastic treatment of the protagonists' accomplishments.[15]

Diomedes makes no distinctions between the Republican and the Imperial *praetextae.* However, many similarities and differences in the treatment of historical material and the relation of this material to contemporary culture become apparent when the plays are viewed according to their dates of composition.[16] Since only one Imperial *praetexta* survives whole, any discussion must center on the *Octavia,* but the evidence surrounding other plays suggests that the tone of the plays was no longer encomiastic but rather was critical of perceived imperial oppression. This change in tone represents an important change to the genre and deserves further examination. From a dramaturgical perspective, the relation of plays to actual events or the audience's knowledge of those events depends on both authorial intent and the audience's interpretation of onstage allusions to offstage events.

In his *Life of Romulus* (8), Plutarch observes the theatricality of events surrounding the legend of Romulus and Remus, which seemed scripted for the stage by Chance:

> Although most details are related by Fabius and Diocles of Peparethus, who seems to have been first to describe the founding of Rome, to some their dramatic and fictitious elements are a cause for suspicion; but one should not be incredulous seeing how much a poet Chance is, and when we consider that the Roman state would not have attained its current power, had it not possessed a divine origin and no small number of paradoxes.

We also find this mirroring of theatricality in everyday events expressed in Livy. The story of the two Tullias and their two Tarquin husbands that ends in two murders and the murder of a king is described as an example of the sort of crime found in tragedy (*sceleris tragici exemplum,* 1.46.3). Since offstage events mirror the theatre in irony, reversals of fortune, and heroic suffering, should they not be easily transferable onto the stage and perceived as "real"? Recreating legends with obscure or conflicting details onstage, such as Aeneas' arrival in Italy or the contest





between Romulus and Remus, would provide a wide scope for dramatists since events cannot be completely recovered, thereby making multiple versions possible, and perhaps even desirable. The recreation of contemporary historical events onstage, however, poses certain problems: stage events cannot stray too far from "real" events, especially when living or near-contemporary persons are portrayed onstage, observed by contemporaries in the audience.[17] Where does one draw the line between theatre and reality?

The relation between historical events and their recreation onstage involves the distinction between illusory and nonillusory drama, but identifying which elements the audience would have considered fictive or unrealistically presented is difficult since we cannot reconstruct an entire *praetexta* from the middle or late Republican period. However, one way to recover which scenes may have appeared onstage, and perhaps how they were staged, is to compare similar material in historiographic accounts. Book 15 of Ennius' *Annales,* for example, which was the original ending of the poem, covers the same material—the Aetolian campaign of M. Fulvius Nobilior—as his *praetexta,* the *Ambracia.*[18]

Ennius was in his sixties when composing Book 15, therefore he wrote his epic during his career as a dramatist. We do not know which of his accounts surrounding events at Ambracia was presented publicly first, knowledge of which could influence an understanding of the version that followed. Unfortunately, any comparison of these fragments, which are analyzed from a dramaturgical perspective later in this chapter, with the four surviving passages of the *Annales* Book 15 is difficult, since the surviving fragments of the *Annales* describe the siege of Ambracia itself, whereas the surviving fragments of the play do not. Parallels to Ennius' account in the *Annales* are found in Pacuvius' later *praetexta,* the *Paullus,* in which the siege of Pydna resembles the description of Ambracia's siege in Ennius' *Annales;* but this does not preclude the possibility that Pacuvius also alluded to passages found in the *Ambracia.*[19]

The surviving fragments of the siege of Ambracia in the *Annales* concern siege warfare and battlefield descriptions and may provide clues as to the material around which Ennius based his play.

> (1)
> *malos defindunt, fiunt tabulata falaeque. . . .*
>
> (SKUTSCH, 388)[20]
>
> They took down the beams, floors and towers went up. . . .

(2)
*occumbunt multi letum ferroque lapique*
*aut intra muros aut extra praecipe casu.*

(SKUTSCH, 389–390)

Many fell to death by sword and rock
either inside or outside the walls in headlong fall.

(3)
*undique conveniunt velut imber tela tribuno:*
*configunt parmam, tinnit hastilibus umbo,*
*aerato sonitu galeae, sed nec pote quisquam*
*undique nitendo corpus discerpere ferro.*
*semper abundantes hastas frangitque quatitque.*
*totum sudor habet corpus, multumque laborat,*
*nec respirandi fit copia: praepete ferro*
*Histri tela manu iacientes sollicitabant.*

(SKUTSCH, 391–398)

From all sides the spears, just as a rainstorm, hailed upon the tribune:
they pierce his shield, the knob creaks against the spears
and the helmets with a grinding sound, but no one was able,
though striving on all sides, to tear apart his body with the sword.
Always did he break and quake many a spear.
Sweat covers his whole body, and he fights hard,
nor is there much breathing room: under a sea of steel
the Histri harrass him hurling spears from their hands.

(4)
*arcus ubi aspicitur, mortalibus quae perhibetur. . . .*

(SKUTSCH, 399)

When he spies the bow, which by mortals is called. . . .

The sack of the city and Nobilior's triumphal return to Rome and subsequent dedication of the Temple of Hercules Musarum give a teleological end to the *Annales,* which opened with the sack of Troy and Aeneas' departure for Italy.

The relation of historical content found in the *Octavia,* an Imperial





play, to known historical events is easier to assess due to the survival of the entire text.[21] The play contains poetic elements such as the compression of events, the contents of speeches, and the figurative language of poetry, but it contains very little that contradicts historical fact.[22] It also contains historical information, in large quantity, not found in any other historiographical source.[23] The author of the *Octavia* could only have known this information if the play was written near in date to the events it describes. Therefore, the author is unlikely to have relied upon contemporary written sources, but may have been an actual witness of or a participant in the events described. No other literary source mentions that Nero waited until Poppaea became pregnant before having Octavia executed.[24] The correct titles of characters are used; for example, Agrippina is called Augusta at lines 328 and 748, a title that was eventually conferred upon Poppaea.[25] The *monumentum* of Acte is mentioned at line 196.[26] The *damnatio memoriae* of Agrippina is mentioned at line 611. Neither Suetonius, Tacitus, nor Dio mention that Nero accepted the title of *pater patriae,* as noted in the *Octavia* in line 444.[27] The author also incorporated selections from Seneca's prose work *Consolatio ad Helviam,* which Seneca quotes as he enters the drama.[28] Thus, Seneca the character is made to resemble the historical Seneca as closely as possible.

Another clue to the staging of *praetextae* is found in passages that allude to similar passages in Greek tragedy. The correspondence, for example, between Euripides' *Phoenissae* lines 571–576, Jocasta's speech to Polyneices, and Hersilia's speech to her father Hersilius in Ennius' *Sabinae—cum spolia generis detraxeritis, quam inscriptionem debetis?*—may indicate similar staging or scene contexts.[29] We also find allusions to Greek tragedy in a play that in turn serves as referent to another play, producing multiple, simultaneous allusions to multiple versions. Aeschylus' *Persians,* for example, serves as a model for at least one passage in the surviving fragments of the *praetextae,* in particular the dialogue between Atossa and the Chorus (176–225) in Aeschylus' *Persians* where the queen describes her dream, and the passage of Accius' *Brutus* where Tarquinius Superbus asks a *vates* to interpret the omens. The content of the passages is not identical, but there is a parallel between the omens involving competition and their interpretation:

Βα. πολλοῖς μὲν ἀεὶ νυκτέροις ὀνείρασιν
ξύνειμ', ἀφ' οὗπερ παῖς ἐμὸς στείλας στρατὸν
Ἰαόνων γῆν οἴχεται πέρσαι θέλων,

ἀλλ' οὔτι πω τοιόνδ' ἐναργὲς εἰδόμην
ὡς τῆσ πάροιθεν εὐφρόνης· λέξω δέ σοι.
ἐδοξάτην μοι δύο γυναῖκ' εὐείμονε,
ἡ μὲν πέπλοισι Περσικοῖς ἠσκημένη,
ἡ δ' αὖτε Δωρικοῖσιν, εἰς ὄψιν μολεῖν,
μεγέθει τε τῶν νῦν ἐκπρεπεστάτα πολὺ
κάλλει τ' ἀμώμω, καὶ κασιγνήτα γένους
ταὐτοῦ, πάτραν δ' ἔναιον ἡ μὲν Ἑλλάδα
κλήρωι λαχοῦσα γαῖαν, ἡ δὲ βάρβαρον·
τούτω στάσιν τιν', ὡς ἐγὼ 'δόκουν ὁρᾶν,
τεύχειν ἐν ἀλλήλησι, παῖς δ' ἐμὸς μαθὼν
κατεῖχε κἀπράυνεν, ἅρμασιν δ' ὕπο
ζεύγνυσιν αὐτὼ καὶ λέπαδν' ὑπ' αὐχένων
τίθησι· χἠ μὲν τῆιδ' ἐπυργοῦτο στολῆι
ἐν ἡνίαισί τ' εἶχεν εὔαπκτον στόμα,
ἡ δ' ἐσφάδαιζε καὶ χεροῖν ἔντη δίφρου
διασπαράσσει καὶ ξυναρπάζει βίαι
ἄνευ χαλινῶν καὶ ζυγὸν θραύει μέσον.
πίπτει δ' ἐμὸς παῖς, καὶ πατὴρ παρίσταται
Δαρείοσ οἰκτίρων σφε· τὸν δ' ὅπως ὁπᾶι
Ξέρξης, πέπλους ῥήγνυσιν ἀμφὶ σώματι.
καὶ ταῦτα μὲν δὴ νυκτὸς εἰσιδεῖν λέγω·
ἐπεὶ δ' ἀνέστην καὶ χεροῖν καλλιρρόου
ἔψαυσα πηγῆς, σὺν θυηπόλωι χερὶ
βωμὸν προσέστην, ἀποτρόποισι δαίμοσιν
θέλουσα θῦσαι πελανόν, ὧν τέλη τάδε·
ὁρῶ δὲ φεύγοντ' αἰετὸν πρὸς ἐσχάραν
Φοίβου, φόβωι δ' ἄφθογγος ἐστάθην, φίλοι·
μεθύστερον δὲ κίρκον εἰσορῶ δρόμωι
πτεροῖν ἐφορμαίνοντα καὶ χηλαῖς κάρα
τίλλονθ'· ὁ δ' οὐδὲν ἄλλο γ' ἢ πτήξας δέμας
παρεῖχε· ταῦτ' ἔμοιγε δείματ' ἔστ' ἰδεῖν,
ὑμῖν δ' ἀκούειν. εὖ γὰρ ἴστε, παῖς ἐμὸσ
πράξασ μὲν εὖ θαυμαστὸς ἂν γένοιτ' ἀνήρ,
κακῶσ δὲ πράξας, ουχ ὑπεύθυνος πόλει,
σωθεὶς δ' ὁμοίως τῆσδε κοιρανεῖ χθονός.

Χο. οὔ σε βουλόμεσθα, μῆτερ, οὔτ' ἄγαν φοβεῖν λόγοις
οὔτε θαρσύνειν· θεοὺς δὲ προστροπαῖς ἱκνουμένη,
εἴ τι φλαῦρον εἶδες, αἰτοῦ τῶνδ' ἀποτροπὴν τελεῖν,
τὰ δ' ἀγάθ' ἐκτελῆ γενέσθαι σοί τε καὶ τέκνωι σέθεν





καὶ πόλει φίλοις τε πᾶσι. δεύτερον δὲ χρὴ χοὰς
γῆι τε καὶ φθιτοῖς χέασθαι. πρευμενῶς δ' αἰτοῦ τάδε,
σὸν πόσιν Δαρεῖον, ὅνπερ φῂις ἰδεῖν κατ' εὐφρόνην,
ἐσθλά σοι πέμπειν τέκνωι τε γῆς ἔνερθεν ἐς φάος,
τἄμπαλιν δὲ τῶνδε γαίαι κάτοχα μαυροῦσθαι σκότωι.
ταῦτα θυμόμαντις "ων σοι πρευμενῶς παρήινεσα,
εὖ δὲ πανταχῆι τελεῖν σοι τῶνδε κρίνομεν πέρι.

Queen: With many nocturnal dreams, I have lived as soon as my son, gathering his army, left to conquer the Ionian land, but never before have I seen such a vivid vision: I will describe it to you: there appeared to me two women—the one dressed in Persian clothes, the other in Doric—who in size and beauty excelled us, now, by far, and being sisters, cast by lot for their father's land—one receiving Greece and the other Asia, the barbaric land. A quarrel breaks out among them, or so it seemed to me, then my son, perceiving this, tries to control and calm them. He yokes them to a chariot and places a bridle around their necks. One towered proud with her mouth obeying her reins, but the other struggles and rips the reins with her hands and, without a bridle, seizes the chariot and breaks the yoke in two. My son falls, while his father Darius, standing by, pities him, but Xerxes, seeing him, tears his robes from his body. These were my night visions. After I arose, I washed my hands in a fair-flowing spring, and wishing to offer sacrifice to guardian deities, I approached the altar, when I sighted an eagle fleeing to the precinct of Apollo—I stood struck dumb with fear. Then I saw a falcon swoop down on him, in flight, and pluck his head with his talons. The eagle did nothing but cower, hare-like. These were the visions I saw that you now hear. Mark my words, should my son succeed, he would be a man admired, but should he fail, no city will hold him. In any case, safe, he will rule this land.

Chorus: Queen mother, we do not wish to give you fear or confidence with our words. Supplicate the gods, if you see some omen, to avert these things so that blessings may be brought to you and your son, your city, and your friends. First, you must pour libations to Earth and to the dead. Beg your husband Darius, of whom you just dreamed, to bring up to light that which will turn out well for you and your son but to keep evils in darkness, beneath the earth. Being prophetic, I kindly encourage you to be of good cheer that all will turn out well.

Atossa's dream of the two women representing Persia and Greece anticipates Xerxes' defeat. The second omen of the eagle attacked by a

hawk, seen by Atossa once she has awakened, further anticipates Greek victory. Both omens are incorrectly interpreted by the Chorus, thus providing some dramatic irony to an otherwise predetermined and known end to the play.

In Accius' *Brutus*, we also find a dream followed by a second omen seen by Tarquin once he is awakened, both of which anticipate his overthrow. The *vates* or priest who interprets the omens, however, predicts the outcome more accurately than did the Chorus in Aeschylus' play and provides the audience with a pun alluding to Brutus' feigned ignorance:

TARQUINIUS: *quoniam quieti corpus nocturno impetu*
*dedi sopore placans artus languidos,*
*visum est in somnis pastor ad me adpellere*
*pecus lanigerum eximia pulchritudine;*
*duos consanguineos arietes inde eligi*
*praeclarioremque alterum inmolare me.*
*deinde eius germanum cornibus conitier,*
*in me arietare, eoque ictu me ad casum dari:*
*exin prostratum terra, graviter saucium,*
*resupinum in caelo contueri maximum*
*mirificum facinus: dextrorsum orbem flammeum*
*radiatum solis liquier cursu novo.*[31]

TARQUIN: Since then, at night's urging, I gave my body
to peaceful rest, soothing my tired limbs with sleep,
a shepherd, in a dream, seemed to drive toward me
a woolly flock of exceptional beauty;
two kindred rams were chosen,
and I slaughtered the nobler of the two.
Then the ram's brother butted with its horns
and rammed at me, and by that blow, I fell.
Then, lying on the ground on my back, seriously hurt,
I saw a great and marvelous deed in the sky:
the fiery radiating disk of the sun
melted to the righthand side on a new path.

VATES: *rex, quae in vita usurpant homines, cogitant curant vident*
*quaeque agunt vigilantes agitantque, ea si cui in somno accidunt*
*minus mirum est, sed di in rem tantam haut temere inproviso offerunt.*
*proin vide ne quem tu esse hebetem deputes aeque ac pecus*
*is sapientia munitum pectus egregie gerat,*
*teque regno expellat; nam id quod de sole ostentum est tibi,*





*populo commutationem rerum portendit fore*
*perpropinquam. haec bene verruncent populo! nam quod ad dexteram*
*cepit cursum ab laeva signum praepotens, pulcherrume*
*auguratum est rem Romanam publicam summam fore.*

VATES: Sire, what things men perform, ponder, worry over, and see in
their lives
and what they do and busy themselves with when awake, if these things
occur to one in a dream,
it is less a cause for wonder, but in such a great matter the gods offer
you something unforeseen and not for nothing.
Be on guard lest the man whom you think is at the same time as dumb
as a sheep bear
is a heart eminently fortified with wisdom,
and expels you from your kingdom; for that which was shown to you
regarding the sun
portends a change of affairs for the people
in the near future. May these things turn out well for the people! For,
since the powerful portent
took its course to the right hand-side from the left, most wonderfully
did it foretell that the Roman state would be supreme.

By alluding to Atossa's dream, Accius draws parallels between Tarquin and Atossa: both are identified as cultural "others" from the point of view of Greeks and Romans, respectively, and both are prescient of their defeats by a superior opponent. A successful scene in Aeschylus' play is adapted by Accius to express the impending overthrow of Tarquin, not as historical fact but as effective drama.

Parallels are found, in turn, between Accius' *Brutus* and Pseudo-Seneca's *Octavia*, especially between Tarquin's dream and Poppaea's dream (711–739), in which Poppaea's former husband Crispinus is killed by Nero; the Nurse's reponse (740–755), which echoes the Vates' speech; and Octavia's sacrifice to avert the omens of her dream (756–761):[32]

POPPAEA: *confusa tristi proximae noctis metu*
*visuque, nutrix, mente turbata feror,*
*defecta sensu. laeta nam postquam dies*
*sideribus atris cessit et nocti polus,*
*inter Neronis vincta complexus mei*
*somno resolvor; nec diu placida frui*

*quiete licuit. visa nam thalamos meos*
*celebrare turba est maesta: resolutis comis*
*matres Latinae flebiles planctus dabant;*
*inter tubarum saepe terribilem sonum*
*sparsam cruore coniugis genetrix mei*
*vultu minaci saeva quatiebat facem.*
*quam dum sequor coacta praesenti metu,*
*diducta subito patuit ingenti mihi*
*tellus hiatu; lata quo praeceps toros*
*cerno iugales pariter et miror meos,*
*in quis resedi fessa. venientem intuor*
*comitante turba coniugem quondam meum*
*natumque; properat petere complexus meos*
*Crispinus, intermissa libare oscula:*
*irrupit intra tecta cum trepidus mea*
*ensemque iugulo condidit saevum* Nero.
*tandem quietem magnus excussit timor;*
*quatit ora et artus horridus nostros tremor*
*pulsatque pectus; continet vocem timor,*
*quam nunc fides pietasque produxit tua.*
*heu quid minantur inferum manes mihi*
*aut quem cruorem coniugis vidi mei?*[33]

Poppaea: I am disturbed, Nurse, by my fearful vision
of last night and, borne by a distraught mind,
I have lost my senses. For when the pleasant day
had yielded to the black stars and the sky of night,
held by the embrace of my Nero,
I fell asleep; nor did I enjoy
a peaceful sleep for long. A sad crowd
seemed to fill my bedroom: Latin mothers
with disheveled hair wept and beat their breasts;
and among the ceaseless sound of a trumpet,
the fierce mother of my husband was shaking
a flickering torch with a threatening gaze.
Compelled by fear, I follow,
when all of a sudden, right before me,
the earth gaped wide-open, where I fell headlong
and spotted and marveled at my marriage bed
onto which I settled. I saw my former husband
and his son approaching with some friends;





Crispinus hastened to seek my embrace
and to taste forgotten kisses:
when Nero suddenly burst into my room
and buried a deadly sword into his throat.
At last great fear shook me from my sleep;
a frightful tremor took over my face and limbs
and shook my heart; fear would have checked my voice,
which your faith and loyalty has now brought forth.
Alas, what do the infernal shades hold in threat for me,
and why did I see my husband's blood?

Nutrix: *quaecumque mentis agitat intentus vigor,*
*ea per quietem sacer et arcanus refert*
*veloxque sensus. coniugem thalamos toros*
*vidisse te miraris amplexu novi*
*haerens mariti? se movent laeto die*
*pulsata palmis pectora et fusae comae?*
*Octaviae discidia planxerunt sacros*
*inter penates fratris et patrium larem.*
*fax illa, quam secuta es, Augustae manu*
*praelata clarum nomen invidia tibi*
*partum ominatur, inferum sedes toros*
*stabiles futuros spondet aeternae domus.*
*iugulo quod ensem condidit princeps tuus,*
*bella haud movebit, pace sed ferrum teget.*
*recollige animum, recipe laetitiam, precor,*
*timore pulso redde te thalamis tuis.*

Nurse: Some force drives the intentions of the mind,
a quick sensation, sacred and ancient, sends these things
through sleep. Do you wonder that you saw your husband
and marriage beds while in the embrace
of your new husband? And that disheveled hair
and breasts struck by hands appear on this happy day?
They were lamenting the separation of Octavia
from the sacred Penates of her brother's house and the household gods of her father's.
That torch carried by Augusta Agrippina, which you followed,
portends that famous name given to you
from envy, and the infernal bed promises the stable future of an eternal house.
The fact that your *princeps* husband buried a sword into his throat

means he will not incite new wars but will sheathe his sword in peace.
Collect your courage, restore your peace of mind, I beg,
put away your fear and return to your bedroom.

POPPAEA: *delubra et aras petere constitui sacras,*
*caesis litare victimis numen deum,*
*ut expientur noctis et somni minae*
*terrorque in hostes redeat attonitus meos.*
*tu vota pro me suscipe et precibus piis*
*superos adora, maneat ut praesens status.*

POPPAEA: I decided to seek the temples and sacred altars
to beg divine power, with sacrifices,
to avert the threats of the night and my dream
and to turn the terror upon my enemies.
Offer prayers on my behalf and worship the gods
with sacred prayers, so that the present calm remains.

By drawing a parallel between Poppaea and Accius' Tarquin, Pseudo-Seneca presents Poppaea as a modern-day tyrant who must be overthrown. The tone of Accius' depiction of Tarquin has become more critical in Pseudo-Seneca, since Nero himself appears in Poppaea's dream to destroy a rival and funereal imagery is interpreted by Poppaea's nurse as festive. We can also see an allusion to the original passage in Aeschylus, in that Atossa, a concerned witness to events, is replaced by Poppaea, an active participant in the political struggle between Nero and Octavia that will determine her future. There is also a progression to the omen in the various versions: from personifications of Greece and Asia, to sacrificial animals, to Nero killing Poppaea's first husband, Crispinus. Tarquin's dream of a sacrifice becomes a sacrifice and prayer for Poppaea, once awakened, to avert the omens of her dream, resulting in multiple and simultaneous allusions to various versions.[34]

Elements from Roman comedy also appear in the *Octavia*, in particular, the characteristically Plautine features of extended monologues spoken in the presence of other characters. The most noticeable parallel use of this device occurs in the opening lines of the *Octavia* and the *Stichus* of Plautus, where the character Pamphila voices a similar sentiment in a dramatic context similar to the *Octavia*.[35] The play opens with a monologue of Antipho (1–57, followed by his orders to servants, 58–67). His daughters Pamphila and Panegyris converse (68–74), after which Antipho speaks another monologue, unbeknownst to them (75–87). After Antipho's second monologue, Pamphila says: *certo enim mihi*





*paternae vocis sonitus auris accidit* ("Truly the sound of my father's voice comes to my ears").[36] In the Octavia, after an opening monologue by Octavia (1–33), Octavia's nurse enters to describe her charge's problems (34–56). Octavia, who is in the palace, cries out (57–71) and prompts the Nurse to say: *vox en nostras perculit aures / tristis alumnae . . . ?* (72–73: "Does the voice of my unhappy child reach my ears . . . ?"). These parallels suggest further ways in which historical dramas share dramatic elements with the tragic and comic stage.

Significant differences do exist, however, between Republican and Imperial *praetextae*. Whereas the Republican legendary plays, as distinct from the triumphal plays, were written about events and historical figures far removed from the date of composition of the play, the Imperial legendary plays, except for the *Aeneas* of Pomponius Secundus, are barely separated in time from their subjects—by only a few years in the case of the *Octavia*, and just over a century in the cases of the *Domitius* and the *Cato*.[37]

Another difference between the Republican and Imperial plays relates to their tone and the occasions for which they were composed. The Republican legendary plays such as the *Brutus* and the *Decius* were written to glorify the descendants of famous political and military figures, while the Republican triumphal plays celebrated the military victories of those who had triumphed over defeated tribes, such as the *Ambracia*, the *Clastidium*, and the *Paullus*. The latter were commissioned for special events; therefore they did not become vehicles by which dramatists could voice political dissent. The Imperial plays, again with the *Aeneas* being a possible exception, were not commissioned to glorify the deeds of a public figure, but rather were written as criticisms of Imperial oppression, whether by the Julio-Claudians or the Flavians, through the presentation of a play about an ancestor or other historical/contemporary figure that alluded to perceived tyrannical behavior, such as the *Octavia*, the *Domitius*, and the *Cato*. The *Octavia* is also an occasion to commiserate with Octavia and Nero's victims—especially, it seems, Britannicus, who is given a eulogy in the description of his funeral.[38]

Categorization is difficult, however, when considering the plays as essentially overt criticisms of Imperial power. The two Imperial *praetextae* of Maternus and his two "barbed" mythological plays may be extreme cases, since it is not likely that Secundus' *Aeneas* was written as criticism.[39] This does not mean that the *Aeneas* was not perceived as such by an audience, which could introduce a prejudiced interpretation (*interpretatio prava*) whenever it liked. As drama, the plays were probably not entirely composed of vitriolic attacks with little dramatic ac-

tion. Any anti-tyrannical sentiments contained in the plays were probably communicated through apposite innuendo within the larger dramatic action.[40] The rule of the Caesars provided enough scope for effective drama.[41]

Some *praetextae,* therefore, allude to earlier Greek historical plays, Greek tragedy, earlier Latin *praetextae,* and contemporary figures and events, producing simultaneous allusions to multiple referents. Offstage reality becomes an allusive referent, as does a previously staged version of a play. The breakdown of the illusion between the stage and the audience leads to the framing and perception of historical events in terms of previously produced tragedies, thereby contributing to an awareness of the theatricality of contemporary offstage events. This marks a continuation of the theatricalization of tragedy under Pacuvius and Accius, but the level of comprehension needed to interpret these complex intertextual and interperformance allusions has increased, and so, too, has the possibility of interpretations unintended by a dramatist or producer. Most important for the restaging of a previously produced play is the simultaneous allusion to the original context of the play, including any allusions that arose from the earlier version or occasion. An analysis of the semiotics of competing realities arising from *praetextae* will shed light on the reception of tragedies considered in chapter 4 and the effect of this theatricality on the plays of Seneca.

## STAGING HISTORY

The *praetextae,* as dramatic recreations of reality onstage, are informed by cultural events performed by historical and contemporary figures but presented in a dramatic, rather than a realistic, setting. Examining *praetextae* from a dramaturgical perspective illuminates the semiotic effects of an audience's viewing history onstage, especially the treatment of the protagonist onstage. It is impossible to reconstruct actual stagecraft, so I focus on the semiotic reception of *praetextae,* especially the semiotics of competing realities, from evidence gleaned from performance cues arising from texts. Extant fragments determine which plays can be examined, and enough fragments survive to analyze plays from each group: early history (Accius' *Aeneadae sive Decius*), contemporary aristocratic achievement (Ennius' *Ambracia*), and an Imperial play (Pseudo-Seneca's *Octavia*).

The legend behind the *Aeneadae sive Decius* is well known. Based on descriptions of episodes surrounding the self-sacrifice of Decius Mus in





Livy (10.27ff.) and Polybius (2.19), the following is a brief synopsis of events that form the backdrop of the play but that may not reflect the actual thematic content of the play. The consuls Q. Fabius Maximus and P. Decius Mus and their armies engage in battle a coalition of Samnites and Gauls at Sentinum in 295. On the right wing Fabius drives back the Samnites, but on the left wing the Gauls with their chariots scatter the Roman cavalry. Decius, as his father before him, sacrifices himself, with the result that the cavalry recovers itself; with the aid of reinforcements from Fabius, the Samnites and Gauls are defeated and their leader Gellius Egnatius slain.

The fragments of the *Aeneadae sive Decius* that survive reveal that the central action of the play may have concerned the interaction between Fabius and Decius. The play ended with the self-sacrifice of Decius. In fragment 1, a messenger informs the generals that the enemy is quiet:

> (1)
> *nihil neque pericli neque tumulti est, quod sciam.*[42]
>
> There is neither any danger nor disturbance of which I know.

A description of the fighting is given in fragment 2:

> (2)
> *clamore et gemitu templum resonit caelitum.*
>
> With an uproar and a groan does the temple of the heaven-dwellers resound.

Fabius orders Decius to take the left wing:

> (3)
> *vim Gallicam obduc contra in aciem exercitum:*
> lue patrium hostili fusum sanguen sanguine.
>
> Lead your force in battle line against the Gallic troops;
> atone the blood of our fathers with the shed blood of our enemy.

In fragments 4–5, the priest, Marcus Livius, occupies the stage, seeking omens from his sacrifice, which he interprets to Decius; but it is not clear how this scene was staged or whether any of the speeches were shared between speakers:

(4)
*te sancte venerans precibus, invicte, invoco,*
portenta ut populo patriae verruncent bene.

You holy and unconquered one, offering prayers do I invoke you
to let the portents promise well for my people and my homeland.

(5)
*et nunc quae deorum segnitas? ardet focus.*

And now what neglect of the gods? The hearth burns.

An indecisive battle follows, after which Fabius and Decius debate their next move in fragments 6–7:

(6)
*quod periti sumus in vita atque usu callemus magis.*

[FABIUS:] Since we are skilled in life and we are more experienced by custom.

(7)
*fateor: sed saepe ignavavit fortem in spe expectatio.*

[DECIUS:] I confess, but often hope has paralyzed a brave man from hope itself.

A chorus of Gauls marches onto the stage, signaled by the anapaestic meter, announcing their presence on the field of battle, but it is unclear whether an actual battle was enacted onstage:

(8)
. . . *Caleti voce canora*
fremitu peragrant minitabiliter.

. . . The Caleti, with sonorous voice,
march threateningly with a din.

In fragment 9, Fabius questions three deserters from Clusium to discover the movements of the enemy:

(9)
*dice, summa ubi perduellum est? quosum aut quibus a partibus*
gliscunt?





Tell me, where is the height of the insurrection? In which direction or from what area
does it grow?

In fragments 10 and 11, Decius returns to the stage and resolves to sacrifice himself:

(10)
*quibus rem summam et patriam nostram quondam adauctavit pater.*

With which my father once increased our supreme power and native land.

(11)
*patrio exemplo et me dicabo atque animam devoro hostibus.*

Through my father's example, even I will dedicate and sacrifice my life to the enemy.

A messenger or soldier from the Samnite/Gaul camp surrenders due to Decius' sacrifice:

(12)
*castra haec vestra est: optume essis meritus a nobis.*

The camp is yours: you are deserving of our best.

Whether or not the play included a mock battle onstage, the fragments raise some questions about how the play may have been produced and whether scenes such as the fighting preceding the battle of Sentinum, the decisive battle itself, and Decius' sacrifice took place onstage. The enemy appeared onstage at least twice, when Fabius questioned the deserters and when the Gallic chorus marched across the stage on the way to battle. Whatever other role the chorus played in the dramatic action cannot be recovered.[43]

The *Ambracia* survives in only four fragments.[44] While the play covers the same material as Book 15 of Ennius' *Annales*, the same events are not described. What little that does survive points to a drama that has much in common with the dramatic action of the *Aeneadae vel Decius*, but little to do with the arousal of tragic sympathy for the defeated Istrians. The exact placement of fragments is far from certain. Fragment 1 of the *Ambracia* may describe the physical condition of a messenger or even an Aetolian sympathetic to the Roman cause:

(1)
*esse per gentes cluebat omnium miserrimus.*[45]

He was determined the most wretched of men everywhere.

In the second fragment, two characters converse before the arrival of a third:

(2)
*bene mones, tute ipse cunctas caute; o vide fortem virum!*

You advise well, you yourself are delaying; O behold the brave man!

It seems probable that this line introduces the arrival of Nobilior onstage. It is not clear whether the chorus acknowledges the advice of a character or whether two characters, and not the chorus, converse before Nobilior's arrival. In terms of dramatic action, Warmington places this fragment last among the four surviving fragments, but without comment.[46] However, it is possible that Nobilior's arrival occurred after a preliminary description of the capture of Ambracia and a glorification of his role in the campaign.

An argument in favor of a late arrival is the opportunity for an extended encomium of the victor's achievements prior to his arrival onstage, and perhaps also in lieu of his extended participation in the drama itself. Another scenario may be an arrival sometime before the siege of Ambracia and again after the fall of the city, at which point his valor would be described by other characters. However, one cannot rule out the possibility, in the light of Diomedes' assertion that Roman generals appeared onstage, that his appearance was neither brief nor understated, but that he could have appeared onstage at length, and possibly even in a reenactment of a battle.

The hypothesis of a late arrival is based partly upon the model of Aeschylus' *Persians* (which was by no means the only model or option available), where after the questioning of the chorus by Queen Atossa, a lengthy messenger speech precedes the arrival of Xerxes. It could be argued that since Xerxes was not an Athenian and therefore not a member of the audience, there was no political reason for a late arrival onstage but rather a dramatic one—Xerxes could only appear onstage in a miserable state after the description of his defeat. Unfortunately we do not know whether Themistocles was brought onstage in the *Sack of Miletus*, another possible model.[47] In the fourth century B.C.E., Moschion put on two historical tragedies, a *Themistocles* and the *Phereans*.[48] It seems that Themistocles did appear onstage in the *Phereans*, but by this time Themistocles was a historical figure, not a contemporary member of the audience.





Fragment 3 may come from a messenger speech describing the lawlessness of the Aetolians:

(3)
*⟨iam⟩ agros audaces depopulant servi dominorum domi.*

At home, the reckless slaves despoil the fields of their masters.

(4)
. . . *et aequora salsa veges ingentibus ventis.*

. . . And you churn the salty sea with immense winds.

Warmington suggests "The dangers of the Adriatic?" for a possible context of fragment 4.[49] The speaker is addressing an elemental force that can stir up the waves of the sea. The most likely dramatic scenario would be an address by Nobilior to Neptune, in thanksgiving for a safe passage over the Adriatic, or a request at the end of the play for a safe return to Italy. Since the dramatic action took place at Ambracia, either scenario is possible.

If the play was produced at Nobilior's triumphal games and/or on an occasion such as his votive games in 186 B.C.E. or the dedication of the Temple of Hercules Musarum, then Nobilior may have been a member of the audience.[50] If, indeed, this was the case, and an actor portraying him was onstage, he would have watched a character representing himself onstage while the audience would have seen both Nobiliors—the one in the audience and the one onstage.

How would the Roman audience have reacted to the representation of living persons on the stage?[51] The evidence for both the depiction of contemporary figures onstage and the reaction of the audience is far from conclusive. Cicero in *De re publica* writes that it was not pleasing to ancient Romans either to praise or to insult anyone onstage, but it is clear from the context that Cicero has comedy rather than tragedy in mind.[52]

Of the mythological/historical plays that Diomedes lists, the *Brutus* and the *Decius*, the legendary figures of L. Junius Brutus and Decius Mus had been dead long before the date of production, therefore occasioning a different reaction to seeing contemporary public figures onstage. As with the *praetextae* of Curiatus Maternus, such as the *Cato*

and the *Domitius*, the characters depicted in the *Octavia* were dead at the time the play was written. The dramatic action of the *Octavia* is set in 62 C.E., yet the date of composition is more than seven years later. Octavia is mostly onstage in the first half of the play, yet she practically disappears in the second half except for three fairly brief speeches.

The effect on the audience of viewing an actor portraying a subject seated in the audience at the same performance was touched on above in connection with Nobilior's *Ambracia*, but since Nobilior's presence could not be attested with certainty, the semiotic implications could not be taken further. In the case of L. Cornelius Balbus' *Iter* or *Journey*, however, we have an audience member's account of the production at which Balbus was seated in the audience while an actor portrayed him onstage.[53] This was a play that Balbus apparently wrote himself to mark his journey to Pompey's camp at Dyrrachium in 49 B.C.E. at the beginning of the civil war to win L. Lentulus over to Caesar's side. (Balbus, however, missed Lentulus.) Balbus' play was staged in Gades, at his own expense, but it was never produced in Rome. We know from a letter dated June 43 B.C.E. that C. Asinius Pollio wrote to Cicero that Balbus was seated in the audience and that he was moved to tears during the performance:

> *illa vero iam ne Caesaris quidem exemplo, quod ludis praetextam de suo itinere ad L. Lentulum pro consule sollicitandum posuit, et quidem, cum ageretur, flevit memoria rerum gestarum commotus. . . .*[54]
>
> In other respects, he did not follow Caesar's precedent, since, during his games, he put on a play (*praetexta*) about his journey to the Proconsul L. Lentulus to convince him to change sides, and moreover, when the play was being performed, he wept, moved at the memory of his accomplishments.

It is not clear what *res gestae* (record of his achievements) moved Balbus to tears, whether it was a recreation of some part of the journey or his success at penetrating the camp. Pollio did not approve of Balbus' behavior, but it is unclear whether it is due to Balbus' writing of a play to record his mission or Balbus' reaction to the play. Did Balbus write too large a role for himself in the drama or greatly exaggerate events surrounding his journey and the role he played? Did he express excessive pride in crying in public at his own achievements? (*Commotus* suggests an excessive reaction seen to draw attention to himself.) Perhaps the cause of Pollio's objections are not so much that Balbus' status changed





from ordinary to extraordinary through dramatic representation, but that Balbus himself was responsible for this portrayal, since his composition of a play about himself was unprecedented even by the examples set by Julius Caesar (*illa vero iam ne Caesaris quidem exemplo*).[55] Later in the letter, Pollio further expresses his distaste at Balbus' behavior by painting his treatment of a Roman soldier who refused to enter the gladiator school at Gades in a tyrannical light.[56]

It is important to note that Pollio reports Balbus' reaction without commenting on the substance of the play or how the rest of the audience received the play. One senses that Pollio's eyes were fixed on Balbus rather than on the production onstage. Cicero only read the dramatic text of the play, which was being disseminated among his circle; therefore he cannot offer firsthand knowledge of the performance text, or of the audience's reaction to the play or to Balbus' reaction to it. The barrier between the stage and the audience is removed if Balbus, as both dramatist and a member of the audience, could see himself portrayed onstage—and more importantly, if the audience could see him both onstage and in the audience. From a semiotic perspective, the blurring of theatre and reality results in a peculiar dynamic: the audience is watching Balbus watching himself onstage, thereby producing a simultaneous spectacle at two different locations within the theatre.

The possible production of *praetextae* at funerals is controversial and produces semiotic challenges of its own. Dupont has argued that the performance of a play about the deceased was an important feature of funerals, especially following the disposal of the deceased's remains outside of the *pomerium* of Rome.[57] Flower, on the other hand, questions the evidence for the production of a play at a funeral, since it would detract from the procession and *laudatio* and would depend on the feasibility of the deceased's family commissioning a play on short notice.[58] If *praetextae* were performed at funerals, we may not be dealing with plays written expressly for the occasion. Even in the instance of plays produced on earlier known occasions, whether at festivals or at votive games, the production of a play that would reinforce any praise found in the *laudatio* could be desirable and effective, especially if we are dealing with a play that is already paid for and that would reinforce the deceased's accomplishments by alluding to the occasion of that earlier production. The evidence is far from conclusive. A look at the semiotics of funerals, in particular at the role of actors in portraying the deceased and the implications of interpreting real and dead figures, is relevant.[59]

The main literary source for a typical funeral of a male aristocrat under the Republic is the Greek historian Polybius, writing in the second century B.C.E.:

> Whenever any illustrious man dies, he is carried at his funeral into the forum to the so-called *rostra,* sometimes conspicuous in an upright posture and rarely reclined. Here with all the people standing round, a grown-up son, if he has left one who happens to be present, or if not some other relative, mounts the *rostra* and discourses on the virtues and successful achievements of the dead. . . . Next after the interment and the performance of the usual ceremonies, they place the image of the departed in the most conspicuous position in the house, enclosed in a wooden shrine. This image is a mask reproducing with remarkable fidelity both the features and the complexion of the deceased. On the occasion of public sacrifices they display these images, and decorate them with much care, and when any distinguished member of the family dies they take them to the funeral, putting them on men who seem to them to bear the closest resemblance to the original in stature and carriage. These representatives wear togas, with a purple border if the deceased was a consul or praetor, whole purple if he was a censor, and embroidered with gold if he had celebrated a triumph or achieved anything similar. They all ride in chariots preceded by the fasces, axes, and other insignia by which the different magistrates are wont to be accompanied according to the respective dignity of the offices of state held by each during his life; and when they arrive at the rostra they all seat themselves in a row on ivory chairs. There could not easily be a more ennobling spectacle for a young man who aspires to fame and virtue. For who would not be inspired by the sight of the images of men renowned for their excellence, all together and as if alive and breathing?[60]

Since the rituals that Polybius describes took place before cremation or interment, the deceased was, in essence, a seated member of the audience among his ancestors at his own funeral. What is fascinating to Polybius, and to us, is the central role played by ancestors in the funeral ceremony. As participants, the deceased ancestors assume the *imagines* or death masks and symbols of public office that are stored in the home and reclaim their former identities and roles among the living. The focus shifts from the recently deceased to his ancestors as spectators, thereby creating a theatre of the dead in the audience, if we remember that our word for theatre comes from the Greek verb θεαῶ, meaning "to watch." This results in concurrent or multiple layers of generations, with the most recently deceased subsumed by the group. One must note,





however, that this group is composed entirely of men. It is the spectacle of the ancestors participating in the funeral of their descendants that catches Polybius' attention and serves a didactic purpose for their younger descendants in the audience.

Turning from the audience to funeral rituals surrounding the deceased, the funeral *pompa,* or procession, which included the wearing of masks and/or the carrying of ancestor busts, led to a *rostra* upon a constructed platform upon which the corpse was placed. Polybius assumes that his readers are familiar with details surrounding interment and the "usual ceremonies." For the funerals of nobles, these platforms were probably located in the Forum Romanorum, but this location is controversial since it depends on a single reference in the *Ab urbe condita* of the historian Livy and may not be the exclusive location.[61] Since *ludi scaenici* or scenic productions were performed at some funerals, in addition to gladiatorial combats, a stage was necessary, but it is not clear from our evidence whether the platform doubled as a stage (with corpse on it?), or whether a stage was set up in sight of the platform. If the stage was in sight of the corpse—a configuration that recalls the placement of temporary stages in the early Republican period directly in front of temples within sight of the god or goddess being celebrated, with the temple steps doubling as theatre seats.[62] As Polybius reports, a mime then represented the deceased symbolically in the audience at the eulogy and at any *ludi scaenici,* among family members of the deceased and surrounded by men (mimes?) imitating his dead male ancestors, who also wore masks of ancestral *imagines.*[63] When not in use for funeral ceremonies, death masks or busts were displayed in the atria of Roman homes for occupants and visitors alike to see.[64] In addition, these dead ancestors drove to the forum in chariots and sat in a row on ivory chairs (Polyb. 6.53). Since these chairs were the symbolic seats of gods, the use of them by the deceased's dead ancestors points to a blurring of the dead with the divine for funeral games and other *ludi.* This ritual was later exploited by the Julio-Claudians to advertise the immortality of the emperor.

Further details surrounding the custom of "playing dead" come from Diodorus Siculus, who describes the funeral of Lucius Aemilius Paullus in 160 B.C.E., giving details similar to Polybius' account of a typical aristocratic funeral with the added detail that mime actors, rather than relatives, were hired to portray the deceased's dead ancestors:

> Those Romans who by reason of noble birth and the fame of their ancestors are preeminent are, when they die, portrayed in figures that not only

are lifelike as to features but show their whole bodily appearance. For they employ actors who through a man's whole life have carefully observed his carriage and the several peculiarities of his appearance. In like fashion, each of the dead man's ancestors takes his place in the funeral procession, with such robes and insignia as enable the spectators to distinguish from the portrayal how far each had advanced in the *cursus honorum* and had had a part in the dignities of the state.[65]

It is significant that Diodorus mentions that the mime actors imitate the carriage and appearance of the deceased, which suggests that these actors could earn a living as participants in funerals to supplement their stage roles. Moreover, it suggests that members of the aristocracy welcomed professional actors in their midst to portray their ancestors despite the low social standing of actors in general at Rome. This interaction must have been intimate enough for actors to observe the character traits of the deceased on more than one occasion, since Diodorus claims the mime's observation was made throughout the deceased's life. Presumably members of the aristocracy did not alter their behavior in the mime's presence or fear caricatures after death at their own funerals.

In addition to Diodorus, the biographer Suetonius also claims that it was the custom (*mos*) for a mime actor to imitate the deceased in appearance and carriage, which he had observed throughout the lifetime of the deceased, in order for the deceased to be a participant in his own funeral. The connection between mime actors and funerals was so strong that the death of Augustus was held to be foreshadowed by the appearance of a mime actor on his throne. At the funeral of the emperor Vespasian, Suetonius reports that the mime actor Favor, imitating Vespasian in "actions and words," joked about the emperor's stinginess:

*sed in funere Favor archimimus personam eius ferens imitansque, ut est mos, facta ac dicta vivi, interrogatis palam procuratoribus, quanti funus et pompa constaret, ut audit sestertium centiens, exclamavit centum sibi sestertia darent ac se vel in Tiberim proicerent.*

(*VESPASIAN* 19.2)[66]

But at the funeral, the arch-mime Favor bearing his likeness and imitating his former actions and words, as is the custom, openly asked the procurators how much the funeral and procession cost. When he heard 10,000,000 sesterces, he shouted that they should give him 100,000 sesterces and throw his body into the Tiber.





Suetonius presents his reader with a paradoxical description of death and the dead. On the one hand, the emperor is dead, but on the other, he is a participant in his own funeral ceremony. What is not clear is whether the mime mocked the emperor in the presence of his corpse. This paradox presented the viewer with the option of accepting the dead as actually alive or, conversely, denying that the deceased had ever actually died. A reciprocal relationship exists, therefore, between death ritual and theatrical allusion recognized by an audience that not only acknowledges the death of the deceased but also perpetuates a figurative living status for the dead and his deceased ancestors.[67]

Sources are silent as to what happened after the funeral ceremonies. Was there a procession back to the deceased's house to deposit the deceased's death mask and those of his ancestors once again in the atrium, or did the actors hand over the masks and clothing and thereby surrender the identities of the deceased and his ancestors immediately following cremation or interment? The former seems more likely, especially if the actors gathered at the deceased's home to collect their masks, but certainty is impossible.

This relationship between the living and the dead extends to the stage itself, although the connection between the dead, or the actor portraying the dead, onstage in a play during funeral *ludi* is more difficult to make. If plays commissioned by public figures were indeed performed during their funeral *ludi,* whether produced for the first time or in addition to an earlier production, then the semiotic implications are fascinating: did the mime actor imitating the deceased in the procession and in the audience at the oration leave the audience to appear onstage, or did a second actor imitating the deceased appear onstage before yet another actor in the audience[68]—either or both of whom were also in sight of the actual deceased? Either scenario is intriguing, especially if we consider the question of representation, and whether death masks were worn or modeled after portraits or whether generals were merely identified onstage by means of their senatorial robes.[69]

Whether the occasion of performance was a funeral, a triumph, a temple dedication, or votive games, the significance of these plays is that the *triumphator* would have been represented onstage with the honorand either alive and seated in the audience or deceased and within view of the stage. The representation of the deceased, whether onstage and/or in the audience, mirrors stage drama, in that the mourners/audience must accept "onstage reality" offstage; that is, theatrical allusion extends to the audience's reality: the audience must accept actors in their midst who are portraying real individuals who are, in fact, dead. The barrier

between the stage and the audience is removed, thus presenting the audience with competing realities to interpret.

What if no dramatists were available or able to write a *praetexta*? How then, could one allude to offstage reality onstage in the dramatic text or within the dramatic reality of a nonhistorical play (illusory drama)? As chapter 4 explores, the opening program of Pompey's theatre illustrates that, unlike a *praetexta* celebrating contemporary aristocratic achievements, in which the honorand appears as a protagonist on the stage, a historical person was alluded to onstage within the dramatic context of a tragedy. If *praetextae* represent a *contaminatio* with reality, this appropriation of the audience's reality in a tragedy through visual referents onstage to encourage an allusion further points to the way in which a restaged production of a previously staged play could become topically relevant. Pompey's *exemplum* of incorporating the audience's reality into the dramatic action of the play as an allusion to contemporary political events produced tragedies that were theatricalized versions of the audience's reality. The honorand has replaced the dramatist. Furthermore, the attempted restaging of Accius' *Brutus* following the assassination of Julius Caesar and Augustus' choice of Varius Rufus' *Thyestes* for his triple triumph of 29 B.C.E. point to the extent to which tragedy could allude to the audience's reality without altering the dramatic text of a previously produced play.





# CREATING METATRAGEDY

*deerat hoc unum mihi,*
*spectator iste. nil adhuc facti reor:*
*quidquid sine insto fecimus sceleris perit.*

(SENECA *MEDEA* 992–994)[1]

I lacked this one thing,
Jason as spectator. Up to now, I have done nothing:
without him, whatever crime I committed is wasted.

After killing her children, Medea (Seneca *Medea* 982–994) considers the effects of her anger and voices her one regret: that she did not turn Jason into a spectator, since her crime does not exist without him as audience, despite the fact that a crime was committed—her children are dead. In other words, Medea needs a stage audience to validate her stage actions. Audience reaction onstage replaces stage action in a drama, which makes the reaction of the actual audience irrelevant.

To examine the effects of this reciprocal relationship between the stage and the audience, two questions inform this chapter, arising from the semiotic reception of *praetextae:* How do dramatists or public figures advertise a historical event or their own status through mythological allusions on the tragic stage? How does the audience distinguish between actor, mythological character, and actual person being alluded to onstage when the allusion challenges what it recognizes as real off the stage? In other words, how does the audience interpret the simultaneous referents arising from these competing realities when it is viewing its

# ROMAN TRAGEDY

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