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Roman Tragedy

Alessandro Schiesaro

Roman tragedy has the rare, if dubious, distinction of boasting a canonical birthdate. At the *Ludi Romani* held in September 240 BCE Livius Andronicus (a writer of Greek background probably hailing from the Magna Graecia town of Tarentum) put on stage, and acted in, a tragedy translated into Latin from a Greek model. The Romans never looked back. Whether the specific date of 240 is factually correct (ancient sources are not univocal in the matter), such precision[1] should not obscure the fact that theatrical activities of various kinds flourished in Rome and other parts of Italy well before that date (*ludi scaenici* are recorded in Rome as early as 364 BCE (Livy 7.2.1–3), and the development of Roman tragedy should thus be contextualized both within the development of a distinctive local culture, and within the polymorphous vicissitudes of postclassical Greek theater, to which the outlying parts of the Greek-speaking world continued to give their own vital contribution (Greek influence on Roman culture had been developing for centuries). Even so, there is no reason not to credit Livius, as ancient sources do, with the daring decision to stage a play with an organic structure, as opposed to disconnected arias or episodes, and to do so by translating into Latin a Greek model, not necessarily an obvious way to " create" a new genre in Rome.

Restoring some sense of geographical and chronological continuity between the emergence of tragedy at Rome and the world of postclassical Greek tragedy (and drama in general) is essential if we are to appreciate Roman tragedies as a distinctive yet integrated part of a generic and stylistic continuum spanning at least two centuries (Genrili [1977] 1979). From Euripides' death (after 408 BCE) to the end of the third century BCE, tragedy continues to be a living genre in Greece and in other parts of the Hellenistic world. When Livius stages his first tragedy, new ones are still being premiered at the Athenian festival dedicated to Dionysus; third-century-BCE Alexandria is home to an accomplished group of tragedians collectively known as the Pleiad, while in southern Italy Rhinton of Tarentum develops the so-called " phlyax" plays, farces poised between the quotidian and the obscene, into tragicomedies

(*hilarotragodiai*) of literary status, which apparently reworked Euripidean themes. Comedy and mythological tragedy must also have flourished in the same cultural milieu. Aristotle himself often refers to fourth-century authors such as Astidamas or Cheremon as accomplished and popular tragedians fully and creatively connected with fifth-century models and practices.

Unfortunately, when we come to reconstruct the evolution of both Greek post-classical tragedy[2] and Republican Roman tragedy, we are severely hampered by the need to rely upon scarce, usually short fragments of what must have been a rich and varied corpus.[3] Indirect tradition – that is, quotation by other authors – has handed down to us a total of approximately 1,700 lines of Roman tragedies written by the great masters of the third, second, and first centuries BCE – Livius Andronicus (?284– after 204), Gnaeus Naevius (active 235–204), Quintus Ennius (239–169), Marcus Pacuvius (220–130),[4] and Lucius Accius (170–186)[5] – plus a number of lines (260) of uncertain attribution, but probably largely penned by the same authors. Since a single play usually included at least a thousand lines, we quickly realize the problematic nature of any attempt to reassemble individual tragedies, not to mention the overall literary or ideological complexion of a playwright, until we reach Seneca's fully preserved tragedies dating to the middle of the first century AD. Very little is known of tragedies written between the death of Accius and Seneca's *floruit*, though Varius wrote a celebrated *Thyestes* in 29 BCE and Ovid (who died in AD 18) a famous *Medea*.[6]

Republican Tragedy

The quantity, quality, and chronological distribution of the extant fragments can suggest flawed perspectives. Many quotations (especially for the oldest tragedians) come from grammatical sources keen to point out and explain linguistic oddities of some kind. It is easy, therefore, to exaggerate the " archaic" tone and stylistic idiosyncrasy of these authors. The paltry number of lines preserved tends to obscure the fact that hundreds of tragedies were written and performed in Republican Rome. Religious festivals with attending theatrical performances lasting one or more days multiply from the second part of the third century, totaling some 11 days by 200 BCE, around 20 half a century later, and a peak of 56 days at the end of the Republic – still not much compared to the 101 days recorded in the mid-fourth century AD – (Polverini 2003; cf. Taylor 1937). As theaters were open to the elements, activity was concentrated between April and November. These calculations exclude the repetitions of *ludi* made necessary for ritual reasons (*instaurationes*), and the performance of tragedies on special occasions such as the dedication of new temples, the celebration of victories in war, or the funerals of important citizens.

Furthermore, while Roman comedy offers a treasure-trove of complete texts which overshadows the more limited remains of contemporary Greek New Comedy, Roman fragmentary tragedies appear to be, at first sight, a very poor relation of the great

corpus of Attic fifth-century tragedy. Yet it would be wrong to infer from these accidents of transmission the subordinate position of tragedy *vis-à-vis* comedy in the Roman literary system, or to presume that Roman tragedians failed to innovate or compete with their models. Finally, the near-total loss of plays written in the final years of the Republic and the middle of the first century does not signal the end of the genre, even if restagings of older plays begin to outnumber new productions at this point, and first-rate authors are harder to find.[7] In 55 BCE Pompey inaugurated his new theater in the Campus Martius, the first permanent structure of its kind in stone (as opposed to temporary wooden ones), where huge numbers of spectators (at least 17,000) could watch a Hollywood-style restaging of Accius' *Clytemnestra* (starring — so Cicero informs us — 600 mules), and of Naevius' *Equos Troianus*, featuring 3,000 mixing bowls. Cicero's highbrow criticism of this extravagant *mise en scène* hints at the vitality and continuing popular appeal of such plays (*ad fam.* 7.1.2). Cicero's own abundant use of tragic quotations in his writings also confirms that these texts were actively known and appreciated.

Roman tragedy on mythical subject matter — called *cothurnata* (from *cothurnus*, buskins) — plays a central role in performing and constructing Roman cultural identity by fostering a creative relationship with its Greek archetypes, and also by fulfilling its traditional role as the medium which examines the relationship between men and gods, the boundaries of rationality and self-awareness, virtue and its rewards, the system of core values shared by the body politic. At the same time, Republican tragedy is an active player in the sociopolitical life of Rome,[8] not least through its privileging — as we shall see — of themes more or less directly related to the city's origins and history. Spectators were likely to seek out political overtones in the plays (including the mythological ones), and to react vocally to especially significant allusions (Nicolet [1976] 1980: 361–73; Flaig 1995). Staging itself was a public event involving state responsibility (magistrates commissioned and paid scripts), and taking place in front of a vast public made up of all social orders, women and slaves included. The *ludi* of 240, for instance, followed the conclusion of the First Punic War the year before, and were meant to celebrate a pivotal stage in the transformation of Rome into an international power. The *semigraecus* (half-Greek: Suetonius *de gramma- ticis et rhetoribus* 1.2) Livius was commissioned by the Senate to sanction Rome's political victory by appropriating for local use a literary genre central to the traditions and civic rituals of Greece (Gruen [1990] 1996: 87–8): the very act of creating Latin versions of hallowed Greek tragedies is an expression of self-confident positioning *vis- à-vis* the hitherto undisputed cultural superpower (as is, for instance, Livius' other inaugural work, his translation of the *Odyssey*). It is also, clearly, a gesture toward a higher degree of cultural and specifically literary refinement, fully understandable in a culture which is now beginning to look well beyond the original boundaries of the central Italian city-state.

Livius', Naevius', and Ennius' biographies testify to the central influence of southern Italian Greek culture on the development of Roman tragedy, and at the same time display the growing civic role of tragedians. They were all born outside

Rome, in parts of Greek-speaking southern Italy, where their education and training must also have taken place, since they all came to Rome as grown men. Livius probably hailed from Tarentum, although there is no firm evidence for the usual assumption that he was brought to Rome as a slave when his hometown fell in 272. Naevius came from Campania, long a thriving center of interaction between Italic, Hellenistic, and Roman culture. Ennius, another *semigraecus*, was born in Messapia, at Rudiae, and according to ancient sources, he was aware of his varied cultural background.[9] Nearby Tarentum might have offered suitable opportunities for the poet's formative years. In the next century, Ennius' nephew and disciple Pacuvius came from Brundisium, not far from Tarentum, where he moved in the last part of his life, while Accius was born in Umbria, at Pisaurum. Whatever the specific accidents of each of these authors' lives, Rome was clearly the thriving hub where theatrical success was to be pursued (Rawson 1985). The creation of an actors' and writers' guild (later known as *collegium poetarum*) toward the end of Livius' life attests the social recognition of the actor's trade, which was put under the aegis of (Roman) Minerva rather than (Greek) Dionysus.

The historian Livy, in his reconstruction of the early literary history of Rome, assigns to his archaic namesake the credit for transforming "medleys full of musical measures" (*impletas modis saturas*, Livy 7.2.7) into organized structures revolving around a plot – *fabulae* (plays) with a coherent *argumentum* (Livy 7.2.8). Livy's summary is teleological and suspiciously neat, but there is no reason to question the idea that Livius was the first to present in Rome a traditional Greek play translated into Latin. In the process, he also managed to render in Latin the complex metrical patterns of Greek drama. His plays alternated recited parts in iambic senarii (a distinctive Latin version of Greek iambic trimeters) with sections sung by actors in other meters (the so-called *cantica*, much like arias in opera), e.g., trochaic septenarii or cretics: in all these cases Livius must have provided original solutions to complex technical issues. The extension and importance of *cantica* in a variety of meters – especially iambic and trochaic, which in Greek were recited, not sung – is a distinctive development of Roman theater, both tragic and comic, *vis-à-vis* Greek models, where the musical element played a relatively more limited role. Conversely, Roman tragedies gave less prominence to the chorus (choral meters modeled on Horatian lyric would be given a new lease of life only by Seneca), whose singing and dancing was restricted. In this respect Roman tragedy develops a trend which is already noticeable in the last comedies by Aristophanes and by Menander, where choral odes are replaced by musical intermezzos (the space in front of the Roman stage was, in any case, smaller than in Greek theaters).

The practice of mixing together different sources (*contaminatio*) was part of a general trend in postclassical Greek theater before it emerged as a trademark of Roman authors (Carrara 1992: 13; Guastella 1988: 11–80). We have titles and fragments from ten tragedies by Livius: *Achilles, Aegisthus, Aiax Mastigophorus* (Ajax the whip-bearer), *Andromeda, Danae, Equos Troianus* (The Trojan horse), *Hermiona, Tereus*, and *Ino* (fragments from the last play have often been considered spurious). While Aeschylus'

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Agamemnon, Sophocles' *Ajax, Sinon*, and *Hermione*, as well as Euripides' *Andromeda* and *Danae* could have been used as models for some of Livius' plays, later authors must also have been among his sources, since it is clear, for instance, that his *Tereus* was not directly inspired by Sophocles' tragedy by the same title. The titles and fragments of Ennius' tragedies[10] show a strong attachment to Euripides, though ancient sources also mention the fifth-century tragediographer Aristarchus as a model.[11] Pacuvius' *Armorum Iudicium* (The award of the arms) was based on Aeschylus; his *Chryses, Hermiona*, and *Niptra* (The washing) harked back to Sophocles, *Pentheus* to Euripides' *Bacchae*; but other plots show the probable influence of post-Euripidean authors. As far as we can ascertain the same variety of models characterizes Accius' tragedies, where Homer and the Cyclic tradition also play a significant role.

Within the confines of myth, Republican authors display a definite predilection for topics connected with the Theban saga, the family of the Pelopides, and, first and foremost, the Trojan War and its aftermath. This focused, selective interest is coherent with the civic function of tragic performances. Setting a widespread trend, 6 of Livius' plays focus in various ways on Trojan themes, as do 3 of Naevius' 6 *cothurnatae*,[12] 8 of Pacuvius' 12,[13] and half of Accius' 45.[14]

A distinct, related type of tragic performance, called *praetexta*,[15] takes its name from the type of toga worn by Roman magistrates, and deals with episodes from Rome's legendary past or contemporary history with a clear didactic purpose (Varro *De lingua latina* 6.18). Not many of the *praetextae* survive (and, again, the only complete example is the post-Senecan *Octavia*), although they may have been performed (perhaps in smaller scale) before 240 BCE, and could thus have contributed to transmit historical knowledge in a society where historiography did not emerge until the end of the third century BCE. The lack of evidence for early historical dramas (whether structurally organic or not) may be due to the fact that they were never written down, and thus escaped the inevitably selective attention of the first-century-BCE scholars (chiefly Varro) on whom we rely for much of what we know about Republican tragedy in general. Accounts of early events in classical nondramatic authors can occasionally be seen to preserve traces of what could well have been early dramatic representations.[16]

Praetextae known to us were generally written for a specific patron and occasion – chiefly votive games after a victory or games held to mark the dedication of a temple – which partly explains why they must have focused on controversial episodes and characters (Flower 1995). Naevius, who was also the author of an epic poem devoted to the First Punic War, wrote the first *praetexta* of which a few words survive. *Clastidium* is named after the northern Italian locality where the Roman consul M. Claudius Marcellus decisively defeated the Gauls in 222 BCE. The general import of this victory was clear, but Naevius' play, also known to ancient sources as *Marcellus*, must have centered on the much criticized deeds of the consul. Similarly, Ennius' *Ambracia* celebrates the victory of his patron Marcus Fulvius Nobilior in the eponymous Aetolic town in 189 BCE, just as Pacuvius' only known *praetexta*, *Paullus*, deals with some important episode in the military career of one of the Paullii, perhaps

Lucius Aemilius' victory at Pidna in 168 BCE. Ennius' play must have directly reflected the political discussions surrounding Fulvius' victory, as a result of which the statues of the Muses were transported to Rome, where the temple of Hercules was dedicated to them and became the new venue of the *collegium poetarum*.[17]

Praetextae survive into late Republican and early Imperial times. Cornelius Balbus writes a *De suo itinere* (His journey) on an episode related to the civil war in 48 BCE; the Caesaricide Cassius composes a *Brutus*; in imperial times we know of an *Aeneas* by Pomponius Secundus (consul suffectus in AD 44 and, according to Quintilian (10.1.98), the best tragic poet of his times), and both a *Cato* and a *Domitius* by Curiatius Maternus (who was possibly killed under Domitian), both arguably infused with anti-Imperial sentiment and praise of lost Republican *mores* (Bartsch 1994: 81–2, 98–105). The anonymous *Octavia*, although transmitted as part of the Senecan corpus, should probably be dated toward the end of the first century AD (Ferri 2003: 5–30). In a series of rather disconnected *tableaux*, it stages Nero's repudiation of his wife Octavia in order to marry Poppaea in AD 62, and Seneca appears as a key character in the play. This attempt to restore to *praetextae* concern for recent events is isolated: no evidence survives of later engagements with the genre.

Roman Republican tragedy hosted intellectual enquiry of considerable sophistication, dealing with social, philosophical, and political issues. Ennius' *Hectoris Lytra*, for instance, contrasts an uncritical appreciation of *virtus*, a form of physical prowess which even evil people can possess, with the opposing values of *ius atque aecum* (Jocelyn 1967: 295; Caviglia 2003: 369–70): *melius est virtute ius: nam saepe virtutem mali / nanciscuntur; ius atque aecum se a malis spernit procul* (a better thing than bravery is justice; for bravery the wicked often attain, but justice and fair play do spurn themselves far from the wicked, 160–1 Ribbeck = 155–6 Jocelyn). In a similar contrast proposed by Euripides (*Suppliants* 594–7), the positive pole is represented by the gods' assistance, not by traditional Roman values such as *ius* and *aequum*. Similar reflections on the nature and limits of *virtus* and *imperium*, concepts central to the self-definition of the Roman upper classes and their positioning in a wider social context, occur in other tragic authors as well.[18]

Accius stages a comparable debate when his Achilles, sulking in the tent (in the *Myrmidones*; 4–9 Ribbeck = 108–13 Dangel) refuses the charge of *pertinacia* (stubbornness) leveled against him by his fellow Greeks, and instead describes his behavior as an instance of *pervicacia* (steadfastness). The two concepts are contiguous,[19] and Achilles adroitly distinguishes the positive and negative implications of each. The result is a carefully structured passage of great rhetorical – almost juridical – [20] finesse which in tone and intent anticipates the (often unappreciated) rhetorical elaboration characteristic of Seneca's tragic diction.

Tragedy was the natural forum for discussing religious issues, among which divination attracts considerable attention. A fragment of Ennius' *Iphigenia* (Ribbeck 199–201 = Jocelyn 185–7), for instance, reworks Achilles' tirade against the seer Calchas in Euripides' *Iphigenia in Aulis* (919–74): "what is this peering at the star-readers' constellations in the sky? When the She-goat or the Scorpion rises, or some

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such name chosen from the beasts, no man looks at what is before his feet; one and all scan the stretches of the sky" (*astrologorum signa in caelo quid sit observationis? / cum Capra aut Nepa aut exoritur nomen aliquod beluarum, / quod est ante pedes nemo spectat, caeli scrutentur plagas*). The intensity of Ennius' polemic (Cicero quotes the lines[21] in the context of an attack against astrologers) ties in with his inclination to privilege rationalistic explanations. In this respect, the tone of the *Iphigenia* fragment may well be seen as an early instance of the all-out attack against the evils of *religio* which Lucretius develops in his own programmatic discussion of the same mythological story in the first book of his Epicurean *De rerum natura* (Ennius' Telamo argues, in orthodox Epicurean terms, against the gods' involvement in human affairs[22]). However, by attacking the emptiness of astrologers – not of official haruspices – Ennius combines his humanistic tendencies with a reaffirmation of the shared civic values threatened by the unwarranted recourse to foreign, uncontrolled, and unsanctioned forms of divination (Paduano 1974: 40–1). As a culture in full and rapid development, forcefully exposed to foreign cultural influences of various kinds, turn-of-the-century Rome shows itself to be particularly sensitive to the threat posed by irrational cults and practices.

The tragedians' noticeable display of interest for Bacchic cults, though perhaps partly motivated by the real or assumed relevance of this myth at the very beginnings of Greek tragedy, and by the lasting importance of Euripides' *Bacchae*, should also be seen as evidence of contemporary cultural (and social) tensions. Naevius' *Lucurgus*, to which belong over half of the 65 surviving lines by Naevius, deals with the downfall of a king horribly punished for his opposition to Dionysus and his bacchants and satyrs. The topic will be revived also in the *Stasiastae vel Tropaeum Liberi* by Accius, also the author of a *Bacchae*; Pacuvius wrote a *Pentheus*; Ennius' *Athamas* contained the description of a Bacchic orgy. The cult of Dionysus had been steadily spreading in Rome toward the end of the third century BCE, and Roman tragedy (and comedy) naturally provide an articulate reflection on the "otherness" of those rituals and their interaction with Roman culture.[23] Political implications were also relevant, since the new cult was soon considered enough of a threat to the stability of the traditional social order to attract the Senate's official ban in 186 BCE. Naevius' and Accius' evaluations of the phenomenon are impossible to establish firmly, though one may perhaps discern a more positive attitude toward it in Naevius than in the conservative Accius.[24]

The Republican tragedies not only established a precedent for political drama, but they also represent an important stylistic model. Accidents of transmission massively condition, to be sure, a full understanding of these authors' style, especially in the case of Livius and Naevius, who are quoted in the context of grammatical discussions.[25] Evaluations by later writers inevitably reflect a change in taste as well as personal preferences. Cicero, for instance, believes that Livius' plays are not worth a second reading (*Brutus* 18.71), but praises Ennius for "not diverting from the ordinary use of words," and Pacuvius' lines appear to him "ornate and elaborate," his style more sober and manly (that is, more "Roman") than Sophocles' (*Orator ad M. Brutum?* 36).

Compared with his Greek models Ennius consistently increases the pathetic appeal of his lines (Traina 1974: 113–65) – a strategy which provides a possible blueprint for Virgil's own approach to Homer. His ability to describe devastating psychological phenomena is noteworthy. A few lines from the *Alcmeo* show the Greek king, whose fate is to certain extent comparable to that of Orestes, persecuted by Furies, a projection of his guilty conscience (25–8 Ribbeck = 22–7 Jocelyn): *unde haec flamma oritur? / ... adsunt; me expetunt./ fer mi auxilium, pestem abige a me, flammiferam hanc vim quae me excruciat./ caeruleae incinctae igni incedunt, circumstant cum ardentibus taedis* (where from rises this flame? ... They're here. It's me they seek. Help me! Thrust away this plague from me, this flaming blast which racks me to death! They come on, girdled with snakes of color blue, they stand around me with blazing brands). Alcmeo's words are remarkable for the powerful mixture of referential and metaphoric language: the fire which burns him inside is at the same time the consequence of the "fever" gnawing at his insides (*pestis*) and the product of the Furies' torches which he imagines are upon him. Seneca's description of the Fury torturing Thyestes' ghosts with torches in the prologue of *Thyestes* (96–100) strongly recalls Ennius' imagery, which also finds its way – together with specific linguistic suggestions – into passages by Virgil and Ovid. Here again it is important to underline the thread linking earlier and later tragedy – both share a predilection for intense, graphic descriptions of overpowering feelings and phenomena. But we should also be aware of the more general influence exercised on classical epos by Republican tragedians, especially in the creation of an energic style shot through with pathos. To give but one example, the ancient commentator Servius Danielinus already noticed that Virgil's description of the storm at *Aeneid* 1.87–9 is influenced by Pacuvius' *Teucer* (335–5 Ribbeck) for the image of the *stridor rudentum* (a creaking of ropes) and by Accius' *Clytemnestra* (32 Ribbeck) for the notion that the father of the gods "absconded" on the day during the storm (Pacuvius' use of the rare verb *inhorrescere*, moreover, stands behind Virgil's *inhorrescit mare* at 3.195 – the sea begins to rage). From the very beginning of his poem Virgil declares an admiration for, and affinity with, Roman tragedians which rapidly emerges as a fundamental programmatic intention of the *Aeneid*, an epic poem characterized by situations and modes of expression typical of tragedy. Dido's "tragedy" in book 4 (where echoes of Ennius' *Medea*, for instance, abound) stands as a peculiarly intense instance of Virgil's strategy.[26]

The frequent characterization of Senecan style as "melodramatic" chimes with similar descriptions of (or charges leveled at) early tragedians. Seneca's *Agamemnon*, for instance, is clearly indebted to Livius' *Aegisthus* (the shift in title between Aeschylus and Livius, and then again between Livius and Seneca, is an indication of the different focus which the author privileges). Livius' play, too, must have told the story of the Greeks' difficult journey back from Troy on a hostile sea. Fragment I (2–4 Ribbeck): *nam ut Pergama / accensa et praeda per participes aequiter / partita est* ("for, Pergama being burnt out, the booty shared fairly among the men partaking it")[27] is evoked in Seneca, *Agamemnon* 421–2: *ut Pergamum omne Dorica cecidit face, / divisa praeda est* (when all Pergamum fell under the Doric fire, the spoil was divided).

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A particularly graphic section of Seneca's extended description of the sea journey before the apocalyptic tempest (449–55) can be compared to the imagery Livius develops in fragment II (5–6): *tum autem lascivum Nerei simum pecus / ludens ad cantum classem lustratur* (but then the frisky snub-nosed herd of Nereus ranged round the vessels, sporting to our song) – compare Seneca's *tunc... ludit* (449), *lascivit chorus* (454), and *lustrat* (455). Well-documented connections also exist between Seneca and Accius (Schiesaro 2003: 30; 84), whose Atreus, in the eponymous play, is already every bit as obsessed with the enormity of his revenge as his Senecan counterpart will be. Both strive to surpass themselves, as both identify *maius*, "more," as the hallmark of their strategy of excess.[28] In Accius, the ethical demarcation between the two brothers is less drastic than in Seneca – both are violent and revengeful. The intertextual memory of Accius' Thyestes will play a significant role in shaping our perception of Seneca's Thyestes, whose flaws are hinted at rather than fully expounded.[29]

Imperial Tragedy

Seneca's plays are the crowning glory of Roman tragedy – and its swan song.[30] Just a handful of lines survive from tragedies composed between the death of Accius and the plays the philosopher-politician-poet writes around the middle of the first century AD, making the numerous, complete tragedies of Seneca's even more of a unique phenomenon. Eight are certainly authentic: *Hercules furens, Troades, Phoenissae* (unfinished by the author), *Medea, Phaedra, Oedipus, Agamemnon*, and *Thyestes*. In addition to *Octavia*, the corpus also contains the unusually long *Hercules Oetaeus*, whose Senecan authorship is generally (though not unanimously) denied.

A masterful example of the expressive powers of Latin poetry, of an aesthetics of excess which has intermittently gripped the Western literary imagination, Seneca's tragedies have attracted over time the most wildly diverging aesthetic judgments. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the plays were considered masterpieces of unsurpassable excellence – Seneca's majestic style was considered superior even to Euripides' (J. C. Scaliger *Poetics* 6.6) – and they exert an extraordinary influence on the whole of Renaissance tragedy[31] and beyond (Corneille is an especially fervent admirer). English tragedians from Marlowe to Shakespeare to the Jacobeans draw from Seneca (or at any rate from the often massaged texts going under his name) crucial situations and images, and, in general, inspiration for a graphic poetics which performs violence and disorder in a troubled cosmos. Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* is closest to Seneca in style and content, and shares with *Thyestes* the explicit recognition of Ovid as a common model (*Richard III* is also deeply Senecan).

In our age, the numerous stagings recorded especially after World War II attest the plays' enduring appeal to a contemporary audience – the enormous variety of permissible stage actions readily solving any problems which the text may have posed to ancient directors.[32] Seneca's "theater of cruelty" (Artaud) is a most appropriate medium for portraying and dissecting the horrors of the human psyche in a nihilist

world which leaves no room for a regulating divine presence, or for any hope that evil deeds will be punished. T. S. Eliot, an eloquent admirer of Senecan drama, considers the final lines of *Medea* – Jason bids farewell to Medea: "travel up above the high expanses the heavens; bear witness that wherever you go there are no gods" – "unique": "I know of no other play which reserves a shock for the last word" (Eliot 1968: 21). The disturbing, recent play *Phaedra's Love* (premiered in 1996), which the English author Sarah Kane writes "after" Seneca (Euripidean traces are also readily discernible),[33] provides another instance of the creative interest elicited by Seneca's relentless exploration of psychological trauma.

In between these "Senecan ages," the romantic revolution heralds a dramatic reversal of fortune in the appreciation of the tragedies. In 1809 August Wilhelm von Schlegel delivered a violent attack against their shortcomings predicated on an unflattering comparison with Greek tragedy; his momentous, if almost incidental, remark that the plays "were never intended to emerge from the rhetorical schools on to the stage" because they are "turgid and chilly" reveals a very dim view of such schools and, in true romantic vein, of anything having to do with rhetoric and lacking in "natural" charm. Although subsequently refined through detailed analyses of dramatic technique (Zwierlein 1966), the theory that Seneca's plays were intended only for recitation does not emerge from a neutral observation of historical, literary, or dramaturgic elements, but rather from a very negative aesthetic evaluation. As "false," epigonic works, Seneca's plays could not aspire to the direct efficacy of Greek tragedy: it would take almost two centuries to see their theatrical nature reasserted, if far from uniformly.

After Schlegel, Friedrich Leo's canonic edition of the corpus in 1878–9 did much to strengthen the belief in the tragedies' inferior artistic quality. Leo defines the novel category of "rhetorical tragedy" (*tragoedia rhetorica*) to account for a tragedy in which – as he synopsizes it – "*ethos* is nothing, and *pathos* is everything" (1878–9: 148). He traces the origin of this genre to the increased importance of rhetoric in Rome after the civil wars, and the aesthetic dissatisfaction with archaic Roman tragedies. Seneca, however, is not, in Leo's opinion, its founder, since he does not doubt that Varius, Pollio, and Ovid must have written in the same vein before him. Nor is he the best: "I would gladly sell all nine of Seneca's tragedies for Ovid's *Medea*" (1878–9: 149). Seneca, claims Leo, simply imports into his plays the preferred rhetorical strategies of his father's *controversiae* and *suasoriae*. Hence his famous conclusion: "These indeed are not tragedies, but declamations composed in a tragic mould and divided into acts" (1878–9: 145).

Excessively rhetorical, and essentially unfit for "proper" staging, Senecan tragedies have long been confined to a subordinate place in the history of classical drama. The tide has been turning in recent years, partly as the result of a general increase in the appreciation of post-Augustan (so-called "Silver") Latin poetry, and partly through a less Manichaean approach to issues of performability. There are, indeed, intermediate options between full, public staging (even if not on the scale of the 55 BCE extravaganza) and solipsistic reading. Public recitation with no stagings is one possibility,

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but Seneca's plays, setting aside a limited number of thorny passages where stage actions are indeed problematic, would also be well suited to the kind of intimate performances in private palaces (with a streamlined apparatus) which were well known in Hellenistic and Roman times. It is important, in any case, to decouple any discussion of performability from an evaluation of the aesthetic merits of Senecan drama as a literary form, and to abandon the unspoken – and far from evident – assumption that only performable plays can be aesthetically powerful.

The issue of performability is, in part, kept alive by the important interpretive consequences it entails. Recent studies inspired by the principles and methods of performance criticism have yielded useful insights, for instance, into the issue of the chorus's size, concluding that Seneca most likely presupposes a small, three-sided raised stage with spectators on all three sides: a small chorus of three is probably all such a stage can accommodate without blurring spectators' lines of vision (Marshall 2000). This form of relationship between the stage and the audience better accounts for the metatheatrical dimension of the performance, which is harder to envisage with a full-frontal stage, which heightens the illusionary nature of the plays. In Seneca, the chorus is no longer continuously present on the stage, and its interaction with other characters is limited (Tarrant 1978: 221–8). A small chorus fits well the predominant characterization of Senecan choruses, more often than not the purveyors of a partial, limited, and questionable take on events. Nor should the chorus automatically be seen as voicing the poet's ultimate "truth," the real "message" of the play. The tendency to overestimate the chorus's point of view is a common enough tendency in Senecan criticism; many choral odes, with their Horatian serenity and reassuring common sense, seem to offer a safe haven in the midst of excessive passions and unflinching violence. The chorus is often the repository of a sensible wisdom, the purveyor of more or less orthodox Stoic takes on events and emotions, but there can be no ultimate answer to the question, whether its view of reality should be taken as the true embodiment of the author's own, a sort of "authentic" interpretation of the plays, or, on the contrary, as testimony, with its own faint voice, of well-meaning but impossible aspirations.

Here, though, we should heed a rather different dictum by T. S. Eliot, who points out: "in the tragedies of Seneca the centre of value is shifted from what the personage says to the way in which he says it" (Eliot 1968: 15). Precisely because the chorus is a character with a specific persona, its point of view cannot aspire to a higher level of truth. Indeed, in several plays, but nowhere more prominently than in *Thyestes*, the chorus's inability to grasp the real terms of the situation, to interpret and understand the motives and intentions of the characters on stage, represents the most poignant indication of its narrow and hopelessly moralizing perspective. By promoting certain choral odes to the level of authorial statements we almost automatically eliminate any such view of the chorus, and a crucial aspect of the dialectics which dominate the plays. A small chorus coming and going from the stage, on the other hand, would emphasize that its feelings and thoughts are – like everyone else's – relative. A double chorus, as in *Troades, Phaedra,* and *Agamemnon,* shows further that there is no

overarching collective point of view, but events are inevitably focalized by partial spectators with their own prejudices and agendas.

The political dimension of Senecan tragedy is both appealing and elusive, all the more so since the dating of the plays is uncertain,[34] and nothing at all is known about their circulation, if any (they may never have been performed – in whatever fashion – or they could have been seen only by a small coterie of friends of the author, who, after AD 62, left Nero's court and became increasingly disillusioned with his former pupil's politics).[35] Its obsession with the corrupting quality of absolute power – *regnum* – is, of course, easy to picture in a cultural and political context increasingly dominated by the vagaries and excesses of unrestrained rulers. Atreus, the protagonist of *Thyestes*, might look like the quintessential Neronian emperor: overpowering, refinedly cruel, megalomaniac, an irresistible combination of dark wit and evil genius. Political reception of the story of Atreus and Thyestes was well established.[36] At the games organized to celebrate the victory at Actium, in 29 BCE, Varius Rufus had presented a successful *Thyestes*, much appreciated (and rewarded) by Augustus, perhaps pleased by the potential identification between the cruel tyrant Atreus and the defeated Marc Antony suggested by the play (Lefèvre 1976; Leigh 1996). However, this very episode underscores how important the circumstances of representation are in the definition of a political message, and whether Seneca's *Thyestes* can be seen as direct criticism of Nero's rule, or whether the reference to incest in *Phaedra* is a coded condemnation of the emperor's family antics (Lefèvre 1990), must remain uncertain (in the latter case, chronology is also an obstacle).

Seneca's tragedies are actively aware of their positioning in Roman literary history. Their titles and themes hark back to celebrated fifth-century Greek models, as well as to various Roman reincarnations of the same myths, yet they consistently thematize repetition and belatedness. Seneca's relationship with Attic plays cannot be doubted, even if specific instances of verbal coincidence are rare. But, unlike his Republican predecessors, Seneca appears uninterested in "translating" Aeschylus, or Euripides, or their epigones, in bridging the distance separating two very different ages. The essence of Seneca's attitude was famously captured by Wilamowitz-Moellendorf, who quipped that Seneca's Medea must have read Euripides' play by the same name (1919: 3.162). Precisely so. Intertextual awareness plays a central role in the characterization of Senecan characters. Medea is the playwright-cum-director of her own revenge play. While Euripides' prologue had opened on the Nurse's account of the antefacts, Seneca takes this as read, and the Prologue zooms in on Medea's own desire to set in motion a revenge of unprecedented violence, and on her understanding that this new episode in her life will attract the same kind of literary immortality as her actions so far: *paria narrentur tua / repudia thalamis* – "let the story they tell of your divorce be like the one they tell of your marriage" (52–3). Atreus flaunts an impressive knowledge of the poetic tradition, correctly identifies the story of Tereus, Itys, and Procne as the obvious precedent and inspiration for his actions, and actively deploys this knowledge in the pursuit of retribution. The more literal-minded and less learned Thyestes is inevitably outwitted and overpowered. Oedipus enters

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Seneca's stage already worn down by a vague and unspoken sense of guilt which is unknown to his Sophoclean counterpart: the Oedipus complex is already at work even before the play unfolds.

Belatedness is thematized in the plot of the tragedies, but is also embodied in their poetics. Seneca's language is shaped by a continuous, even obsessive dialogue with intertextual models, not because of a lack of imagination, but precisely because it is deeply aware that its "coming after" is a reiteration of well-known horrors whose intensity is magnified by repetition (Schiesaro 2003: 221–51). Virgil and Ovid are, unsurprisingly, the predominant stylistic models, but their influence on Seneca is also rooted in thematic and ideological motifs. Seneca appears especially keen to read in the *Aeneid* an authoritative precedent in the exploration of the role of *furor* in human affairs. The Prologue of *Thyestes*, the most sustained metaliterary reflection in the corpus on the connection between *furor* and tragic inspiration, draws unmistakably on the dialogue between Juno and Allecto in *Aeneid* 7, a "second proem" which heralds (again) the beginning of war.[37] The recurrent Senecan motif of the murder-as-sacrifice finds in the closing scene of the *Aeneid* a harrowing archetype whose influence rivals the development of the same theme in Greek tragedy (Putnam 1995: 246).

Scholars have long favored reading Seneca's plays as an illustration of the main tenets of Stoicism[38] – at least after they become reconciled to the idea that both the tragedies and the prose work were written by the one and same author. Stoicism explicitly entertains the possibility of exploiting poetry as a powerful means to express eternal truths, and conveying them more expressively and engagingly than prose would allow. This approach, however, is problematic. There are few instances where Stoic terms of reference and evaluation are directly and explicitly engaged. Moreover, the nature of the tragedies as intricately layered literary products makes it difficult, sometimes impossible, to disentangle moral messages consistent with Stoicism (or even more loosely with conventional Roman morals) from the hopelessly subverted moral chaos that dominates the tragedies. A case in point is *Thyestes*, arguably the most successful of all of Seneca's plays. The tyrant Atreus, bent on punishing his brother Thyestes, commits horrific crimes – he slaughters his nephews and serves them up at dinner to an ignorant Thyestes. The emotional reaction to, and moral evaluation of, Atreus' actions, however, are complicated by two factors. Thyestes himself is far from blameless. Seneca's text hints at *his* earlier attack against Atreus, his attempt to seize the throne, and his adulterous relationship with Atreus' wife Aerope (the doubt about his children's real paternity still torments Atreus). Moreover, from the moment he steps onto the stage Atreus is consistently portrayed as the author's doppelgänger, the playwright of his own revenge tragedy, for which he seeks a poet's inspiration. Without Atreus' artistic creativity, rooted in his thirst for revenge, there would be no *Thyestes* for us to watch – no aesthetic pleasure, if any, to be had. Atreus' "bigger" crime is symbol and reflex of Seneca's own competitive take on tragedy-writing, of his determination to outdo – in style and in horror – the famous models he resuscitates one last time.

Seneca's tragic style is characteristically intense – or "mannerist" and "baroque." A superior control of the expressive power of rhetoric accounts for a large part of the style's strength: rhetorical tropes such as antithesis, brevity, paronomasia, figura etymologica – to name but a few – endow Seneca's language with poignant wit and unexpected depth. Take, for instance, Medea's first unwilling intimation of the horrors to come in the Prologue (23–6): *me coniugem optet, quoque non aliud queam/ peius precari, liberos similes patri / similesque matri – parta iam, parta ultio est: / peperi* (let him long for me to be his wife and – the worst thing that I can pray – let him long for children who resemble their father, and resemble their mother. It's born already, vengeance is born: I have given birth). Still unclear about the shape his revenge against Jason will take, Medea wishes on him hostile and ungrateful children – which she has already borne him. The repetition of the verb *pario* in different forms (and the concurrent shift from metaphorical to referential use) poignantly, if indirectly, conveys to a knowing public the murderous thoughts which are as yet inchoate in Medea's mind. "Let him long for me to be his wife," which was also intended as a destructive wish – Medea is aware of her terrifying magical powers – already conveyed the complexity of her attitude toward Jason: the curse, after all, conceals a desire that he may still long for her as his wife. Like Ovid, an author who plays a central role in shaping Seneca's poetic diction, Seneca excels in the ability to extract unforeseen tragic meanings from an apparently innocuous language.

Seneca's "theater of the word" is animated by such masterful exploitations of the expressive powers of a refined poetic language, schooled, no doubt, in the myriad techniques which rhetoric had perfected. Intense desires, and great horrors, find in this polished and formally impeccable clothing its harshest representation.

NOTES

I am very grateful to Rebecca Bushnell, and to Marco Fantuzzi and Ingo Gildenhatd for their helpful comments.

1 Equally problematic is the assumption of 240 BCE as the starting point of Latin literature tout court: Habinek (1998: 34–68, 179–89); Suerbaum (2002: 83–7).

2 About which Xanthakis-Katamanos (1980) offers a realiable survey. See also Sifakis (1967).

3 Fragments are quoted according to the numbering of Ribbeck's second (and third) edition (Ribbeck 1871 = *TRF*). Vols. I (Ennius) and II (Livius, Naevius, Pacuvius, Accius) of Warmington (1935–8) contain almost all fragments with notes and English translation. Noteworthy single-author editions include Jocelyn (1967) for Ennius; D'Anna (1967) for Pacuvius; Dangel (1995) fot Accius.

4 The most recent critical study is Manuwald (2003).

5 See most recently the essays collected in Faller and Manuwald (2002).

6 On *Medea* see Nikolaidis (1985). Bardon (1952) provides information on tragedians whose texts are lost: (1952: vol. 1, 52–3; 132–5; 158–66; 326–30; vol. 2, 47–52; 127–32; 213–17).

7 A brief but incisive account of this period of transition can be found in Goldberg (1996).

8 See in general Flower (2004).

9 Accotding to Gellius (17.17.1), Ennius used to say that he had "thtee hearts, because he could speak in Greek and in Latin and in Oscan."

10 *Achilles, Aiax, Alcmeo, Alexander, Andromacha. Andromeda, Athamas, Cresphontes, Erechtheus.*

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11 *Gloss. Lat* 1.568. *Achilles* is quoted as *Achilles Aristarchi* in Fest. p.282.9. No Euripidean model can be pinpointed for *Aiax, Eumenides, Hectoris Lytra, Nemea,* and *Telamo,* and there are doubts about *Athamas, Alcmeo,* and *Cresphontes*: Jocelyn (1967: 45).

12 *Aesiona. Danae, Equos Troianus* (The Trojan horse), *Hector Proficiscens* (Hector's departure), *Iphigenia,* and *Lycurgus.*

13 *Antiopa. Armorum iudicium* (The award of the arms), *Atalanta. Chryses, Dulorestes, Hermiona. Iliona. Medus. Niptra, Pentheus sive Bacchae. Perihoea. Teucer.*

14 *Achilles. Aegisthus. Agamemnonidae* (Agamemnon's children), *Alcestis, Alcmeo, Alphesiboea, Amphitruo. Andromeda, Antenoridae* (Antenor's sons), *Antigona. Armorum iudicium* (The award of the arms), *Astyanax, Athamas, Atreus, Bacchae. Chrysippus. Clytemnestra. Deiphobus, Diomedes. Epigoni* (The after-born), *Epinausimache* (The battle at the ships), *Erigona, Eriphyla. Eurysaces. Hecuba. Hellenes* (The Greeks), *Io, Medea sive Argonautae* (Medea, or the Argonauts), *Melanippus. Meleager, Myrmidones* (The Myrmidons), *Neoptolemus. Nyctegresia* (The night-alarm), *Oenomaus. Pelopidae* (Pelops' sons), *Persidae* (Perseus' sons), *Philocteta. Phinidae* (The sons of Phineus), *Phoenissae* (The Phoenician maidens), *Prometheus. Stasiastae vel Tropaeum Liberi* (The rebels or Liber's trophy), *Telephus. Tereus. Thebais* (A tale of Thebes), *Troades* (Women of Troy).

15 On *praetexta:* Zorzetti (1980); Flower (1995); Wiseman (1998); Manuwald (2001).

16 This line of argument has been recently championed especially by Wiseman (1998). See, e.g., Ovid *Fasti* 4.326 on the arrival of the Magna Mater, with the narrator's comment *mira sed et scaena testificata loquar* (amazing events, but the stage is my witness).

17 Other notable Republican *praetextae* include Ennius' *Sabinae,* and Accius' *Aeneadae vel Decius* and *Brutus.*

18 Cf. Livius Andronicus 16–17 Ribbeck, Naevius 17 Ribbeck, inc. 116–17 Ribbeck.

19 Ennius appears to have collapsed them into one (408 Ribbeck = 383 Jocelyn), and Accius may well be seen to be reacting, here, against his predecessor: cf. Degl'Innocenti Pierini (1980: 75).

20 As already acknowledged in antiquity: Quintilian 5.13.43. On the whole issue, and a comparison with similar argumentations in Cato, see Degl'Innocenti Pierini (1980: 74–7).

21 *De republica* 1.30 and *De divinatione* 2.30 (187 only).

22 269–70 Ribbeck = 270–1 Jocelyn: "For my part I have always said, will say, there is no race of gods in heaven; and yet they take no thought, it seems, how fares mankind."

23 See now Flower (2000).

24 On Naevius: Pastorino (1955), a rather extreme view; on Accius: Dangel (1995: 339).

25 The best overall treatment is Lennartz (1994).

26 On Virgil and the Republican tragedians see Wigodsky (1972), with further bibliography, and Hardie (1997: esp. 322–5).

27 Translation from Warmington (1935–8), with modifications, as for all archaic fragments.

28 Cf. 198–201 Ribbeck = 29–32 Dangel with Seneca *Thyestes* 267–70.

29 See later, p. 281.

30 Boyle (1997) is an excellent introduction. Tarrant (1978) a classic account of the structural changes Seneca introduces to his tragedies vis-à-vis earlier plays.

31 See esp. Braden (1985).

32 Information on performances is collected at Oxford by the Archive of Performances of Greek and Roman Drama (www.classics. ac.ox.uk/apgrd).

33 A brief, incisive analysis in Mayer (2002: 85–7).

34 A comparison with another work by Seneca, the *Apocolocyntosis,* invites us to consider a date before AD 54 for *Hercules furens,* while a possible reference to the invasion of Britain in *Medea* 375–9 would point to composition under Claudius (who died in AD 54). Metrical technique, on the other hand, suggests that *Agamemnon. Phaedra,* and *Oedipus* were com-

posed before *Medea, Troades*, and *Hercules*,
which in turn precede *Thyestes* and *Phoenissae*
(Fitch 1981).

35 Three years later he was ordered to commit
suicide after the emperor discovered his in-
volvement in a conspiracy.

36 Garelli-François (1998) argues that Ennius'
Thyestes displays anti-Macedonian feelings,

and especially an attack against the king,
Perseus.

37 Compare esp. *Thyestes* 83–6 with *Aeneid*
7.335–40.

38 On the origins of this method see Mayer
(1994).

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