have preferred abbreviations of their individual titles (*Prov.* = *De Providentia, etc.*) to the collective title *Dialogi*.

(2) In references to Seneca's *Agamemnon*, the addition of "(n)" to a line-number indicates that further information may be found in the note on that line in my edition (Cambridge, 1976).

INTRODUCTION

A. SENECA'S LIFE AND CAREER[1]

Information about Seneca's career is relatively abundant, but very unevenly distributed. During the last fifteen years of his life he was one of the most important men in Rome, and he figures prominently in historical accounts of that period—in Suetonius, Dio Cassius, and above all in Tacitus, who found Seneca an absorbing and challenging subject. The first fifty years are much less well documented, and Seneca's own prose works, although to a large extent ostensibly personal, are oddly uninformative about the details of his life; his concern was with moral generalities rather than with autobiography, and so he reveals less about himself than Cicero, Horace, or even Ovid.

Lucius Annaeus Seneca was born at Cordoba in southern Spain, probably between 4 and 1 B.C.[2] He was brought to Rome when scarcely out of infancy,[3] and seems to have had no further connection with his native country. Seneca belonged to a wealthy equestrian family, several of whose members attained recognition in literary or public life. His nephew, the son of his retiring younger brother Mela, was the phenomenally gifted poet Lucan, and his older brother Novatus (later called by his adoptive name Gallio) makes a brief appearance in the *Acts of the Apostles* (18.12–17) as the proconsul of Achaea who declined to involve himself in theological disputes between Paul and the Jewish community of Corinth. Seneca's father, also named L. Annaeus Seneca (ca. 55 B.C.–ca. A.D. 40), combined the skills of a prosperous landowner with a keen interest in literary pursuits. His writings included a history of Rome (now lost), but he is best known for a voluminous and unusual memoir, a record of the declaimers he had heard at Rome and elsewhere, compiled in his last years for the edification of his sons.[4]

[1] Useful digest of information in *OCD*[2] 976–77 (by A. Ker and L. D. Reynolds); fuller accounts by M. T. Griffin in *Seneca*, ed. C. D. N. Costa (London, 1974), 1–38, and (with detailed treatment of disputed points) in *Seneca: A Philosopher in Politics* (Oxford, 1976), 29–66—referred to below as "Griffin (1974)" and "Griffin (1976)" respectively. The dates given for Seneca's prose works are, except where noted, those supported by Griffin (1976), 395–411.

[2] The date is calculated from Seneca's only explicit statement about his age, in *Epist.* 108.22 *in primum Tiberii Caesaris principatum iuventae tempus inciderat*.

[3] *Cons. Helv.* 19.2.

[4] The work is extant in a severely mutilated form: for five of the ten books of *Controversiae* only excerpts are preserved, and only a single set of *Suasoriae* survives from a

The schools of declamation that so fascinated Seneca's father provided Seneca himself with his training in rhetoric, and the imprint of the declamatory style can be seen in all his writing, poetry as well as prose. (See below, pp. 19–22.) Declamation may also have given Seneca his first exposure to moral philosophy, since ethical reflections, often in the form of vigorous denunciation of contemporary vice, were an indispensable item in a declaimer's repertory. A specific influence in this direction was exerted by Papirius Fabianus, who combined distinction as a rhetor with serious philosophical interests; nearly fifty years after hearing him declaim, Seneca could still vividly recall the impression Fabianus had made through the refinement and dignity of his manner.[5] This admiration may have made Seneca receptive to Papirius' blend of Stoic and Pythagorean doctrines; at any rate Seneca now embraced moral philosophy with characteristic fervor, and even began to practice vegetarianism as a means to simplicity of life. This conspicuous asceticism did not please Seneca's father, who felt the practical Roman's distaste for philosophy, and before long the younger Lucius was persuaded to return to a more traditional style of living.[6]

Poor health, along with paternal pressure, may have recalled Seneca from the rigors of abstinence. At about this time, when he was in his early twenties, he suffered a severe attack of the wasting disease (probably a form of tuberculosis) from which he would never be entirely free.[7] To recuperate he went to Egypt, where his mother's stepsister was the wife of the prefect C. Galerius.[8] After a stay of several years he returned with them to Rome in 31 (Galerius died in a shipwreck en route) and began a somewhat belated political career by standing for the quaestorship; his aunt, though by nature shy and withdrawn, exerted herself successfully on his behalf.[9]

collection of unknown size. The remains are now accessible in the excellent Loeb edition of M. Winterbottom (Cambridge, Mass., 1974; 2 vols.).

[5] *Epist.* 40.12, 52.11, 100 *passim*. Fabianus' works included treatises on political philosophy (*Epist.* 100.1 *civilium libri*) and natural science (*libri causarum naturalium, De animalibus*), cf. Schanz-Hosius 2.359.

[6] *Epist.* 108.22; nor, Seneca wryly added, did he fiercely resist his father's urging (*nec difficulter mihi ut inciperem melius cenare persuasit*). Abstinence from meat had become suspect with Tiberius' prohibition of foreign religious observances; Seneca's vegetarian phase may therefore be placed in or shortly before A.D. 19.

[7] *Epist.* 78.1. His condition, Seneca later claimed, was so serious that he often contemplated suicide (*ibid.*, 2).

[8] *Cons. Helv.* 19.2.

[9] *Ibid.*

The quaestorship brought Seneca into the Senate, and made him eligible for higher office. His progress, though, was not notably rapid: by the time Gaius (called "Caligula") had been succeeded by Claudius in 41, Seneca had held the offices of aedile and *tribunus plebis* but had not yet advanced to the praetorship.[10] Insecure health may have held him back, perhaps also imperial disfavor. Seneca's rhetorical brilliance had begun to attract notice, and Gaius, who took a deluded pride in his own eloquence, would not have looked kindly on a potential rival. Suetonius records his scornful descriptions of Seneca's speeches as "mere classroom exercises" and "sand without lime."[11] Dio goes further, and relates that in 39 Gaius, enraged when Seneca pleaded a case with particular flair, ordered him executed, relenting only when advised by one of his mistresses that Seneca was expected to die of consumption before long.[12] The story could be fiction, or a romantic garbling of events; some have thought, for example, that Seneca had been involved in a conspiracy against Gaius exposed in 39.[13] What is clear is that by this time Seneca was prominent enough to seem worth liquidating.

Seneca escaped disaster under Gaius only to encounter it at the hands of his successor. Late in 41 he was implicated in the prosecution of Gaius' sister Julia Livilla for adultery. In all likelihood the accusation was prompted by Claudius' wife, the domineering Valeria Messalina; the reasons for her hostility to Seneca are not obvious, and Livilla may have been the real target of her enmity.[14] The charge, whether true or false,[15] cannot have been incredible; Seneca must therefore have been moving regularly in the highest levels of society. The Senate voted the death penalty, but Seneca was once again spared, perhaps through the intervention of Gaius' other sister, Julia Agrippina;[16] the sentence was commuted to banishment, and Seneca left Rome for Corsica. His disgrace was the final blow in a series of personal misfortunes: his father had died not long before, and more recently he had lost a young son and perhaps also his wife.[17]

[10] Tac. *Ann.* 12.8.3. Griffin (1976), 44–51, instead defers the start of Seneca's political activity, placing his quaestorship in 37 or later. It has also been suggested that Seneca's political career was held up in the 30s by his family's associations with the disgraced Sejanus; cf. Z. Stewart, *AJP* 74 (1953), 70–85.

[11] *Cal.* 53.2 *lenius comptiusque scribendi genus adeo contemnens, ut Senecam tum maxime placentem commissiones meras componere et harenam sine calce diceret.*

[12] Dio 59.19.7.

[13] See Griffin (1976), 53–56.

[14] As suggested by Dio 60.8.5.

[15] Tacitus implies disbelief by his use of *iniuria* at *Ann.* 12.8.3 (see n. 21); Dio, almost unrelievedly hostile to Seneca, accepts the truth of the charge (61.10.1).

[16] When Agrippina intervened on Seneca's behalf in 49, he was already *memor beneficii* (Tac. *Ann.* 12.8.3); for the connection with 41, see Griffin (1976), 52 n. 4, 60.

[17] *Cons. Helv.* 2.4–5. It cannot be determined whether Pompeia Paulina, Seneca's wife

With his political hopes apparently shattered, Seneca returned to philosophy as a solace for his losses and an outlet for his energies. He had already published at least one work of a philosophical nature, a letter of consolation to a noble lady named Marcia on the death of her son. On Corsica he developed and perfected the role of Stoic moralist and teacher that he would play for the rest of his life; when he returned to Rome in 49, it was with a reputation for wisdom as well as eloquence.[18] The products of these years include two other *consolationes*, one comforting his mother Helvia for the irreplaceable loss of his presence, the other directed to Polybius, a powerful freedman in the service of Claudius, a fawning piece of flattery and a faintly disguised appeal for pardon and recall. Seneca also started work on a more ambitious treatise, a study of irrational passions (*De ira*) in which he took an author's delayed revenge on Gaius by depicting him as an archetype of sadistic cruelty and deranged egomania.[19] Other works, not precisely dated, may also come from this period, such as the lost biography of his father (*De vita patris*), the lost *De remediis fortuitorum* (a suitable subject for a Stoic in exile), and conceivably the *De brevitate vitae*, addressed to Pompeius Paulinus, the father of Seneca's (second?) wife.[20] There was time as well for less serious pursuits (*leviora studia*, *Cons. Helv.* 20.1), among which Seneca would have included poetry—even tragedy. (See below, p. 12.)

After eight years, Seneca's exile was ended by a shift in Roman dynastic politics. Messalina was overthrown and executed in 48, and in the following year Claudius married Julia Agrippina, whose son by her earlier marriage to Cn. Domitius Ahenobarbus was then eleven years old. Agrippina hoped to secure the succession for her child in preference to Britannicus, Claudius' own son by Messalina, who was slightly more than three years his junior. If the young Nero was to be groomed for power, no more suitable guide and adviser could be imagined than Seneca. He was already thought to be well disposed to Agrippina and resentful toward Claudius; arranging his recall would make him an even more willing instrument of her ambitions, while the public would approve the restoration of an eminent man of letters.[21]

So the Senate, which had condemned Seneca to death, now voted his rehabilitation. At Agrippina's urging he was designated praetor for 50,

at the time of his death, was also the mother of this son, or whether both infant and mother perished in childbirth; see F. Giancotti, *Cronologia dei 'Dialoghi' di Seneca* (Turin, 1957), 111–31, Griffin (1976), 55–57 (inclining to the latter view).

18 This seems a natural inference from Tacitus' phrase *ob claritudinem studiorum eius* (*Ann.* 12.8.3).

19 *De ira* 1.20.8–9, 2.33.3–6, 3.18–19.5.

20 Griffin, *JRS* 52 (1962), 105, 108–9, argued that the essay was written when Paulinus was *praefectus annonae*, a position he held from roughly mid-48 to 55.

21 Tac. *Ann.* 12.8.3.

and he began instructing Nero first in rhetoric, later in ethics. Meanwhile, Agrippina's hopes for her son were being quickly fulfilled: he was adopted as Claudius' heir in 50, and four years later, on Claudius' death by poisoning, he was proclaimed as his successor.

Nero's accession altered Seneca's role and enhanced his influence; while continuing to teach the young *princeps*, he became as well an intimate adviser to the new regime. One of his functions was to serve as Nero's principal speechwriter (a position that had not existed under previous emperors); in Nero's first days as emperor Seneca composed both the remarks he made when presented to the praetorian guard[22] and the formal *laudatio* of Claudius that he later delivered in the Senate.[23] Seneca now acquired the traditional emblems of high prestige—he took a suffect consulship in 56, the year after his brother Gallio had held the same position—, but official honors counted for relatively little compared to the influence he could exert as Nero's confidant. Only one other person outside the imperial family had an equal ability to shape policies and decisions, S. Afranius Burrus, the prefect of the praetorian guard whose support was now essential for an emperor's survival. Seneca and Burrus shared power with uncommon harmony,[24] and used their authority to hold both the ambitions of Agrippina and Nero's wilder impulses in check. The first five years of Nero's reign, when their control of events was most secure, were later held up as a model of wise and stable administration.[25] Seneca's political responsibilities did not halt his activity as a philosopher. Soon after Nero became emperor (in 55/56), Seneca addressed to him a substantial treatise on the proper behavior of a ruler (*De clementia*, originally in three books, of which only the first and the opening of the second survive); slightly later came a longer work, a seven-book discussion of the morality of giving and receiving (*De beneficiis*). Other writings located with probability in these years include *De constantia sapientis*, *De tranquillitate animi*, and *De otio* (all addressed to Annaeus Serenus), and *De vita beata* to his brother Gallio. Whether any of the lost ethical works, such as the *De officiis*, *De amicitia*, or the *Exhortationes*, were also composed in this crowded period is not certain. On the other hand, one work of a quite different character can be securely fixed to the first months of Nero's principate, a genuinely

22 Dio 61.3.1.

23 Tac. *Ann.* 13.3.2.

24 Tac. *Ann.* 13.2.2 *hi rectores imperatoriae iuventae et (rarum in societate potentiae) concordes diversa arte ex aequo pollebant.*

25 Aurelius Victor *Caes.* 5.2 (cf. *Epit. de Caes.* 5.2) *quinquennium tamen tantus* [sc. Nero] *fuit . . . uti merito Traianus saepius testaretur procul differre cunctos principes Neronis quinquennio.* On the meaning of *quinquennium Neronis*, see F. A. Lepper, *JRS* 47 (1957), 95–103, Griffin (1976), 424.

funny satire on Claudius' deification—the *Apocolocyntosis* or "Pumpkinification" of Claudius[26]—that was at once an attack on the abuses of the previous ruler and an advertisement of the virtues to be looked for in his successor.[27]

The rewards of association with Nero did not come without cost to Seneca's reputation or, perhaps, to his conscience. His quickly-won prominence made him a natural target of envy and resentment, and even such a generally detested figure as P. Suillius Rufus, tried for extortion in 58, could win some response by sneering at the prodigious wealth that a provincial philosopher had amassed in four years of imperial friendship.[28] The glaring discrepancy between Seneca's personal fortune and his Stoic professions of detachment from material things was clearly a source of embarrassment to him; he addressed the issue in *De vita beata*, taking the comfortable view that a philosopher can enjoy and make good use of riches without the risk of being corrupted. It is harder to judge how much uneasiness Seneca felt at another consequence of his position, the necessity of acting as apologist for Nero's crimes. The murder of Claudius was soon followed by that of Britannicus in 55 and of Agrippina in 59; all of Seneca's skill could not prevent the official lies from sounding more hollow on each new occasion. The *laudatio* for Claudius had touched off laughter,[29] but the speech in which Nero justified Agrippina's death prompted a deeper revulsion, directed at Seneca even more than at his master.[30]

As Nero grew older, he became less amenable to restraining influences. Three years after the murder of Agrippina, Burrus died (some said he had been poisoned),[31] and Seneca found himself isolated and outmaneuvered by new advisers like Ofonius Tigellinus, all too ready to win Nero's favor by encouraging his basest instincts. In an attempt to extricate himself, Seneca asked Nero for permission to retire from his service; the request was formally denied, but from 62 onward Seneca did

[26] The title contains a pun on ἀποθέωσις and κολοκύντη (= *cucurbita*, a pumpkin or gourd) whose precise meaning is not clear (exhaustive discussion by M. Coffey in *Lustrum* 6 [1961], 247–54), but which probably plays on the association of that vegetable with hollowness, and by implication, slow-wittedness. (An English rendering might be "Claudius the Gourd.") Seneca's authorship of the work has been doubted (perhaps because of the liveliness of its humor) but is virtually guaranteed by Dio 60.35.3. On authorship and title see now the edition of P. T. Eden (Cambridge, 1984).

[27] A further purpose was to promulgate the *fable convenue* that Claudius had died of natural causes; cf. Griffin (1974), 20.

[28] Tac. *Ann.* 13.42 (Tacitus notes that Suillius was condemned, *haud tamen sine invidia Senecae*).

[29] Tac. *Ann.* 13.3.2.

[30] Tac. *Ann.* 14.11.4.

[31] Tac. *Ann.* 14.51.1

largely withdraw from active involvement in the affairs of the court.[32] In 64, after the disastrous fire at Rome for which Nero was widely blamed, Seneca again offered his resignation and the surrender of most of his fortune. Nero accepted Seneca's money, but still withheld permission to retire. In a pointed display of independence, Seneca pleaded illness and refused to leave his rooms for some time.[33] The virtual end of his political activity left Seneca once again free for philosophy; between 62 and 65 he composed the two largest of his surviving works, the *Naturales Quaestiones* (originally in eight books, of which six are now complete and two fragmentary) and the series of *Epistulae morales* to Lucilius, 124 of which remain from a once greater number.[34]

In the spring of 65 Seneca's fertile retirement was cut short. According to Tacitus, Nero had for some time wanted to rid himself of Seneca's disapproving presence, and had even tried unsuccessfully to remove him by poisoning.[35] When a plot to assassinate Nero headed by C. Calpurnius Piso was uncovered in April of 65, Seneca's connections with Piso and with some of the other conspirators gave the emperor his chance.[36] Twice before Seneca had been placed under sentence of death, but this time there was no reprieve, only the opportunity to die by his own hand rather than face execution. In his writings Seneca had often held up death as the supreme test and proof of virtue,[37] and he now set about his own end determined to leave behind a model of philosophical resolution. No detail was omitted: there were bracing words for his disconsolate pupils, reluctant acceptance of his wife's desire to die with him, sufficient strength in the last painful moments to dictate a final statement, even a cup of hemlock taken straight from Plato's *Phaedo*. Tacitus' account—one of the great death-scenes of ancient literature—captures both the strain of theatrical contrivance and also the genuine courage, affection, and tranquillity of the protagonist.[38]

Reactions to Seneca have varied widely from his own time onward.[39]

[32] Tac. *Ann.* 14.56.6.

[33] Tac. *Ann.* 15.45.5.

[34] He also began work on a synthesis of his ethical views, referred to as *moralis philosophiae libri* or *volumina* (*Epist.* 108.1, 109.17).

[35] Tac. *Ann.* 15.45.6, 60.3.

[36] Tac. *Ann.* 15.60.4–61.5. On Seneca's involvement in the plot, Griffin (1974), 25–28. Tacitus knew of reports that, had the conspiracy succeeded, Piso would have been eliminated and Seneca made emperor (*Ann.* 15.65.1).

[37] E.g., *B.V.* 7.3 *tota vita discendum est mori*, *Epist.* 26.4–6 *ille laturus sententiam de omnibus annis meis dies*, etc., 70.6, 77.20 *quomodo fabula, sic vita . . . quocumque voles desine; tantum bonam clausulam impone.*

[38] Tac. *Ann.* 15.62–63.

[39] Ancient testimony is collected by W. Trillitzsch, *Seneca im literarischen Urteil der Antike* (Amsterdam, 1971; 2 vols.); see also Griffin (1976), 427–44; on views of Seneca's style see below, p. 22.

He inspired loyalty and devotion in those closest to him,[40] and both his writing and his manners were highly attractive to his contemporaries.[41] In one respect even his severest critics have had to acknowledge him as a master: no satirist ever brought a sharper eye to the exposure of vice and folly.[42] Yet many have been repelled by his apparent readiness to compromise his principles, by his scandalous wealth, and by his service to a vicious emperor. It may be that, for all his admissions of failure and imperfections, Seneca was too confident of his virtue and too willing to believe in the wisdom of his actions fully to recognize the ambiguities of his position. One is even tempted to wonder if the character of Thyestes in this play, whose aspirations to a life of withdrawal and simplicity are not strong enough to withstand the attractions of power, may in some measure represent what Seneca knew, or feared, about himself.[43] The contradictions remain, however they may be accounted for, but these traces of weakness are also part of Seneca's curious appeal, since they suggest, behind the confident pose of the sage and preacher, the more sympathetic figure of a fallible and uncertain human being.

B. SENECA'S TRAGEDIES

THE CORPUS OF SENECAN TRAGEDY

The plays attributed to Seneca are preserved in two forms, corresponding to the two main classes of the manuscript tradition (below, pp. 36–37). One branch (called "E") contains nine plays, in the following order: *Hercules* [*Furens*], *Troades*, *Phoenissae*, *Medea*, *Phaedra*, *Oedipus*, *Agamemnon*, *Thyestes*, *Hercules* [*Oetaeus*].[44] The other (known as "A") has ten plays, the nine found in E plus the historical tragedy *Octavia*. The A branch also presents the plays in a different order and in some cases with different titles: *Hercules Furens*, *Thyestes*, *Thebais* [= *Phoenissae*], *Hippolytus* [= *Phaedra*], *Oedipus*, *Troas* [= *Troades*], *Medea*, *Agamemnon*, *Octavia*, *Hercules Oetaeus*. Modern editors generally follow the order and titles of E (while placing *Octavia* last); there is

[40] His wife Pompeia Paulina was prevented by Nero from dying with him, and lived on *laudabili in maritum memoria* (Tac. *Ann.* 15.64.2); his posthumous supporters also included the historian Fabius Rusticus and the author of the tragedy *Octavia* (on which see below, p. 9). Juvenal expected no disagreement in asking *libera si dentur populo suffragia, quis tam / perditus ut dubitet Senecam praeferre Neroni?* (8.211–12).

[41] The popularity of Seneca's style was deplored by Quintilian (10.1.125 *tum autem solus hic fere in manibus adulescentium fuit*); cf. also Tacitus *Ann.* 13.3.2 *fuit illi viro ingenium amoenum et temporis eius auribus accommodatum*. The best description of Seneca's personal charm, a blend of rectitude and graciousness, emerges from Tacitus' phrase *comitas honesta* (*Ann.* 13.2.2).

[42] Quint. 10.1.129 *in philosophia parum diligens, egregius tamen vitiorum insectator fuit*.

[43] See 446–70, 487.

[44] The first and last plays in E are simply titled *Hercules*.

no way of knowing if this reflects Seneca's own arrangement—or even whether he arranged his plays for publication as a body—, but the variant titles in A are obviously unauthentic,[45] and there is no reason to invest A's order with any more authority.

At various times doubts have been raised about the authenticity of several plays in the collection, but at present only the *Octavia* and the *Hercules Oetaeus* remain under serious suspicion. The two cases are quite different. Few scholars would now maintain Seneca's authorship of the *Octavia*; the case against it appears convincing both on external grounds (the play seems to allude to the circumstances of Nero's death in 68, when Seneca had been dead for three years) and also on grounds of style and form, which show more divergences from Senecan idiom than can be easily explained.[46] It was probably composed soon after Nero's death[47] by a writer under strong Senecan influence, who almost certainly never intended it to pass for a work of Seneca. By contrast there is no clear agreement about the *Hercules Oetaeus*. It reproduces the manner and form of Senecan tragedy much more closely than the *Octavia*, and even skeptics must admit that its style is at times indistinguishable from that of the genuine plays; on the other hand, it can hardly be a finished work of Seneca, not only because of its enormous length (1996 lines, as against a high of 1344 in the eight undisputed plays), but also because it echoes many Senecan phrases in an inept way—usually a strong indication of spuriousness.[48] It might be an inferior poet's elaboration of material that Seneca had begun to cast in dramatic form.[49]

[45] *Troas* and *Thebais* are impossible titles for tragedies (the latter possibly suggested by the title of Statius' epic), and *Hippolytus* is less satisfactory than *Phaedra* as an indication of that play's central focus. The defining epithets of the Hercules-plays, *Furens* and *Oetaeus*, may also be later accretions, required when the un-Senecan *Oetaeus* was added to the corpus (see next paragraph).

[46] See most recently M. E. Carbone, *Phoenix* 31 (1977), 48–67; C. J. Herington, *CHLL*, 530–32. It is fair to add, however, that Senecan authorship still finds supporters, for example in L. Y. Whitman's edition and commentary (Bern, 1978; reviewed by O. Zwierlein in *Gnomon* 52 [1980], 713–17).

[47] A more precise date (late in 68) is supported by T. D. Barnes, *Museum Helveticum* 39 (1982), 215–17; see also P. Kragelund, *Prophecy, Populism, and Propaganda in the Octavia* (Copenhagen, 1982), 49–52.

[48] Cf. W. H. Friedrich, "Sprache und Stil des *Hercules Oetaeus*," *Hermes* 82 (1954), 51–84, B. Axelson, *Korruptelenkult: Studien zur Textkritik der unechten Seneca-Tragödie "Hercules Oetaeus"* (Lund, 1967).

[49] The *Phoenissae* is anomalous for a different reason: it lacks choral odes and looks more like a set of independent dramatic episodes than a conventional drama, even an incomplete one, cf. *HSCP* 82 (1978), 229–30.

DATING OF THE TRAGEDIES[50]

Although many of Seneca's works cannot be dated with precision, this problem is particularly acute in the case of the tragedies: in the absence of firm evidence, scholars have placed some or all of them in every phase of Seneca's career, from his youth to the final years of retirement. Seneca makes no reference to the plays in his prose works, one of several examples of a disjunction between his philosophical writing and other sectors of his life. Other ancient writers are hardly more informative: the first explicit reference to a Senecan play is in Quintilian (9.2.8, quoting *Medea* 453), the next a century later in the grammarian Terentianus Maurus.[51] The plays do not overtly mention contemporary persons or events; veiled topical allusions have often been suggested, but no dating based on them has won general acceptance.[52] In short, there are no securely attested facts to serve as points of reference; all arguments are to some extent speculative, and the best that a discussion can hope to achieve is not proof, but plausibility.

The most reliable inferences are perhaps those based on imitations of Senecan tragedy in other works of Latin literature. The similarities between the plays and Lucan's *De bello civili*, for example, are too close and too numerous to be the result of coincidence, and in many places Lucan has clearly been influenced by Seneca rather than vice-versa.[53] It seems reasonable to conclude that all of Seneca's plays were written before Lucan began work on his epic, which was probably not earlier than 60 and not later than early 63.[54] Evidence of this kind also produces a terminus for one play: Seneca's own *Apocolocyntosis*, written shortly after Claudius' death in October 54, contains what looks like a deliberate echo and parody of the *Hercules Furens*.[55]

[50] The most recent discussion, in Fantham, 9–14, is also one of the fullest and most balanced; among earlier treatments note M. Coffey, *Lustrum* 2 (1957), 149–51, my edition of *Agamemnon* (Cambridge, 1976), 6–7 (dogmatically sceptical).

[51] This and other *testimonia* are registered in the editions of R. Peiper and G. Richter (Teubner [Leipzig], 1902), xxiv–xxx, and G. Viansino (Paravia [Turin], 1965), v. 1, 103–6.

[52] The leading proponent of this approach has been O. Herzog, in *RhM* 77 (1928), 51–104; for criticism, see Coffey, 150, Fantham, 13–14 (although she accepts the reference to the *lusus Troiae* in *Tro.* 777–79 as yielding a *terminus post quem* of 47 for *Troades*). E. Lefèvre (*ANRW*, forthcoming) has argued that the *Oedipus* alludes to Nero's murder of Agrippina. For a possible contemporary reference in *Thyestes* see note on 629–30.

[53] Cf. C. Hosius, "Seneca und Lucan," *NJb* 145 (1892), 337–56. For instances in *Thyestes* cf. notes on, e.g., 358–59, 370, 574–75. See also Zwierlein, *Prolegomena*, 246–48.

[54] The chronology of Lucan's writings raises problems that cannot be pursued here; on the whole I follow the judicious conclusions of F. M. Ahl, *Lucan* (Ithaca, 1976), 41–42, 343 n. 13, 352–53.

[55] Cf. O. Weinreich, *Senecas Apocolocyntosis* (Berlin, 1923), 62, 112. The most striking verbal parallel is perhaps *Apoc.* 12.3.3 *resonet tristi clamore forum* and *HF* 1108 *resonet maesto clamore chaos*. (The mock-dirge of the *Apocolocyntosis* also resembles the *kommos* of Hecuba and the Trojan chorus in *Troades*.) A similar argument could be made concerning *Agamemnon* and the first Einsiedeln Eclogue, written in the first years of Nero's reign, but the verbal parallels are not decisive (cf. *Ag.* 330–41 and *Ecl. Eins.* 1.22–33).

No other play can be assigned a precise *terminus ante quem* in this way; it would therefore be very useful to know the place of *HF* in the order of composition.[56] Attempts to arrive at a relative chronology on the basis of shared themes, phrasing, and verse technique have been generally unproductive,[57] but a recent study by J. G. Fitch may represent a breakthrough.[58] Fitch has calculated for each play the percentage of strong sense-pauses occurring within the line rather than at line-end: the degree of variation extends from a minimum of 32.4% in *Agamemnon* to a maximum of 57.2% in *Phoenissae*. On the assumption (true for Sophocles and Shakespeare) that higher percentages reflect greater flexibility in handling the verse-form and therefore later date, the plays break down into three groups: I *Agamemnon* (32.4), *Phaedra* (34.4), and *Oedipus* (36.8); II *Medea* (47.2), *Troades* (47.6), and *HF* (49.0); III *Thyestes* (54.5) and *Phoenissae* (57.2). This classification coincides nicely with groupings suggested by common elements of dramatic technique[59] or metrical practice;[60] one detail of meter in particular lends striking support to part of Fitch's division. Poets of the first century A.D. became progressively freer in shortening the final *o* in certain classes of words, including nouns of the third declension, adverbs like *aliquando*, and the first person singular forms of verbs in the present and future tenses.[61] What had not been previously noticed is that Seneca's practice in this regard differs significantly in *Thyestes* and *Phoenissae* from that seen in the other six plays, showing a marked preference for the shortened forms, especially in first person singular verbs.[62] This shift in technique strongly suggests that *Thyestes* and *Phoenissae* were Seneca's last plays, and also that some time intervened between their composition and that of the other six tragedies.

[56] The order of plays in the two branches of the manuscript tradition (on which see above, p. 8) seems to bear no relation to their chronological sequence; compare the *Dialogi*, where the earliest work, the *Cons. Marc.*, is in the middle of the collection.

[57] Fantham 12–13. Fantham has herself attempted to show that *Agamemnon* follows *Troades* (*CJ* 77 [1981–82], 118–29), a conclusion at odds with the chronology tentatively adopted here.

[58] *AJP* 102 (1981), 289–307.

[59] For example, the plays of "Group 1" account for eight of the nine places where a Chorus follows an ode with a transition to the next act (Fitch, 306); other instances in the notes on *Thy.* 107, introductory note to Act IV.

[60] *Oedipus* and *Agamemnon* are the only plays containing polymetric choruses; if Fitch's theory is correct, this was a feature of Seneca's early plays that he soon abandoned.

[61] The standard study is R. Hartenberger, *De o finali* (diss. Bonn, 1911).

[62] Fitch, 303–5. The figures for *Thy.* and *Pho.* are 10 long/36 short and 5 long/ 42 short respectively; among the other six plays the greatest preponderance of shortened final *o* is in *Tro.*, with 8 long/12 short. The figures for first person singular verb forms are: *Ag.* 1, *Pha.* 4, *Oed.* 1, *Med.* 5, *Tro.* 2, *HF* 5, *Thy.* 18, *Pho.* 27.

If Fitch's relative chronology is accepted, the bulk of Seneca's work in tragedy was probably completed by 54, the latest date at which the *HF* can have been written. Nothing prevents placing the composition of all the plays some time before this date, perhaps during Seneca's years on Corsica, when by his own account he varied philosophical reflection with lighter pursuits.[63] There is in fact reason to believe that Seneca had acquired a name as a tragedian not long after his return from exile in 49. Quintilian recalls that as a raw youth (*iuvenis admodum*) he heard Seneca debating with Pomponius Secundus in *praefationes* over a nicety of tragic diction.[64] Quintilian would not have qualified as a *iuvenis* before 50, and since Pomponius was away in Germany for 50 and part of 51, the end of 51 is the earliest feasible date for the dispute. Seneca may therefore have been writing tragedies at this time, although that is not the only inference that could be drawn from Quintilian's testimony: it is also possible that Seneca was holding recitations of plays he had written while in exile but which had not yet been published in Rome, or even that his remarks on Pomponius were made incidentally during the introduction to a non-dramatic work. What does seem certain is that by the early 50s Seneca could disagree publicly with a well-known tragedian on a point of style and expect his views to be taken seriously; this suggests that Seneca was himself a dramatist of some standing at the time.

The result of the discussion so far is to show that no play of Seneca can be decisively dated after the accession of Nero in 54, and that there is instead good reason to place at least some of Seneca's dramatic activity before that date. There is, however, one item of evidence that might point in a different direction. In 62, when Tigellinus and others were blackening Seneca's name to Nero, one of their insinuations was that Seneca had started to turn out works of poetry (*carmina*) more frequently once Nero had conceived a liking for them.[65] In Tacitean usage *carmina* can denote dramatic poetry[66]—although the word could as easily refer to lyric or epigram—, and it has been suggested that the jibe of Seneca's detractors alludes to a late renewal of his interest in tragedy.[67] This idea could now be combined with Fitch's evidence for a

[63] *Cons. Helv.* 20.1, cf. above, p. 4. One could add that the works securely dated to the years of exile are quite few, especially in light of Seneca's obvious capacity for writing at great speed.

[64] Quint 8.3.31 *nam memini iuvenis admodum inter Pomponium ac Senecam etiam praefationibus esse tractatum an 'gradus eliminat' in tragoedia dici oportuisset*; discussion in C. Cichorius, *Römische Studien* (Leipzig, 1922), 426–29. The *praefationes* referred to are the remarks made by the author or performer before the recitation of a new literary work. (See below, p. 13.)

[65] Tac. *Ann.* 14.52.3 *obiciebant etiam . . . carmina crebius factitare, postquam Neroni amor eorum venisset.*

[66] Cf. *Ann.* 11.13.1 of Pomponius Secundus: *is carmina scaenae dabat.*

[67] So (with due caution) C. J. Herington in *CHLL*, 871.

break between Seneca's first six plays and *Thyestes* and *Phoenissae* to produce an approximate date of 60–62 for the last two plays. The hypothesis is no more than possible, but there is an undeniable fascination in the thought that *Thyestes*, which contains Seneca's most harrowing depiction of pathological tyranny, might have been composed toward the end of his days in the court of Nero.[68]

PERFORMANCE[69]

The Athenian dramatists of the fifth century B.C. composed their plays for public performance, on a specific occasion and usually under their own direction. In Rome the situation was quite different. It is true that the Romans, following the Hellenistic Greeks, classed tragedy with epic as the most prestigious of literary genres. The theater in Rome, however, never attained the high esteem it had enjoyed in Greece, and a close involvement with the stage would have been thought positively dishonorable for a Roman of high social standing. As a consequence, at least as early as the Augustan period some Roman writers seem to have composed tragedies without regard to stage performance: Ovid, for example, claimed never to have written for the theater (*Tr.* 5.7.27 *nil equidem feci, ut tu scis ipse, theatris*), which suggests that his *Medea* was not intended for theatrical production. The place of the theater was partially taken over by public recitations, at which an author or professional reader would deliver all or part of a new composition to an invited audience.[70] Recitation of a tragedy did not preclude stage performance: Seneca's contemporary Pomponius Secundus first sought his friends' opinion at a recitation, then tested their criticisms against the response of a wider public in the theater.[71] For other writers, though, like Curiatius Maternus as depicted in Tacitus' *Dialogus*, recitation seems to have been the only form of public performance expected or desired, providing an occasion to advertise new work and to solicit friendly criticism before releasing the text for publication.[72]

Where do Seneca's tragedies fit in this picture? No external evidence connects Seneca with the theater, whereas the young Quintilian heard him and Pomponius Secundus debate a point of tragic language in the introductory remarks before a recitation—not conclusive proof that the

[68] The reference to the Alans in 629–30 might also support a date in the late 50s or early 60s; see note *ad loc.*

[69] For more detailed discussion see Zwierlein, *Rezitationsdramen*; Fantham, 34–49.

[70] The practice of recitation was introduced at Rome by Asinius Pollio, perhaps as early as the 30s B.C. (Sen. *Contr.* 4. *pr.* 2); the custom was quickly adopted by poets (cf. Ovid *Tr.* 4.10.57–58, recalling his first public readings in the mid-20s B.C.) and was well established for all genres of literature by the end of Augustus' life, cf. Suet. *Aug.* 89.

[71] Pliny *Epist.* 7.17; cf. Fantham, 7.

[72] *Dial.* 2.1–3.3.

tragedies were recited, but an indication that Seneca did use the recital-hall to bring new work before the public.[73]

The evidence of the plays themselves is more abundant, but harder to interpret.[74] Many scholars of the last century, following the lead of August Wilhelm Schlegel, held up what they saw as the plays' rhetorical excesses, lack of taste, and general artificiality as arguments against their having been written for the theater. Defenders of stage production have countered by pointing to the undeniable theatrical power of many Senecan scenes and by arguing that standards of taste and effectiveness derived from Attic tragedy may not be relevant to Roman drama of the first century A.D. The debate has grown more sophisticated,[75] but it has not been, and indeed cannot be, definitively settled: we simply know too little about what was or was not acceptable to theater audiences of Seneca's time to prove that his plays were not theatrically viable. It can be said, though, that Senecan drama shows a lack of concern for theatrical realities that goes considerably beyond what is attested for any phase of ancient stage-history. The setting can fluctuate without warning (as in *Troades*); absent characters appear at a moment's notice (e.g., Calchas in *Tro.* 351–53, Medea's children in *Med.* 843–45), and figures on stage just as abruptly vanish (e.g., Cerberus, who has a cameo part in *HF* 593–615, the Trojan chorus in *Agamemnon*); action that would be visible to a theater audience is elaborately narrated (e.g., the signs of Cassandra's possession in *Ag.* 710–19), while significant entrances and exits are reduced to dumb-shows by a shorthand style of description (e.g., Agamemnon's reception by Clytaemestra in *Ag.* 778–81, Pyrrhus' silent entrace and exit in *Tro.* 999–1003, the arrival of Hippolytus' body in *Phaedra*, only signalled by an offhand reference in 1158 *planctus . . . supra corpus invisum*[76]). Taken one by one, each of these features might be reconciled with the possibility of theatrical performance, and it should also be added that some plays pose fewer problems in this respect than others: *Thyestes*, for example, is much more traditional in its dramatic technique, and potentially more effective

73 Quint. 8.3.31; above, p. 12.

74 Zwierlein, *Rezitationsdramen*, 9–11, gives a convenient survey of earlier views.

75 Some recent views (in addition to Fantham's well-rounded discussion): E. Lefèvre, *Gnomon* 40 (1968), 782–89; B. Walker, *CP* 64 (1969), 183–87; W. M. Calder III, *CP* 70 (1975), 32–35; W. M. S. Russell, in *Papers of the Radio Literature Conference* (Durham, 1978), 1–26 (all supporting stage-production). In *HSCP* 82 (1978), 213–63, I have tried to relate Senecan dramaturgy to theatrical developments between the fifth century and his own time (without arguing that Seneca wrote for the theater); below, pp. 16–17.

76 Far more serious dramatic inconsistencies have been found in this scene, e.g., by Zwierlein (*Rezitationsdramen*, 13–23); it does look as though an actable staging can be worked out only by convicting Seneca either of loose writing (if *ab altis tectis* 1154 means "from the lofty palace" and not the expected "from the rooftop") or else of poor management of stage-space (if Phaedra laments over Hippolytus' body while pointlessly standing on the palace roof).

as a stage-play, than, say, *Troades* or *Phaedra*. On the whole, though, I think it probable that Seneca conceived his plays without regard for the restraints of theatrical production.[77]

In her recent discussion of this question, Elaine Fantham has noted that some aspects of Senecan dramaturgy which point away from the theater—for example, the frequent absence of textual cues to identify speakers—would also cause difficulty for a recitalist; she also stresses the problems a single performer would face in rendering passages of rapid dialogue (such as, e.g., *Thy.* 257–59). Our almost complete ignorance of recitation procedure makes these objections hard to assess, but they do not seem insurmountable. A reader might, for example, have prefaced each scene with the names of the speaking characters in it, and a skilled performer could surely distinguish various characters by changes of voice-quality and delivery. Some passages would admittedly lack the impact that a second or third voice could provide, but this limitation is inherent in the nature of recitation and must therefore have been accepted by the Roman writers and audiences who made this such a popular form of literary entertainment.[78]

But to pose the question exclusively in terms of theatrical performance vs. recitation is to obscure an essential fact. Whatever form of public exposure Seneca may have planned for his tragedies could only have been the beginning of their career, a preliminary to the ultimate goal of publication.[79] Most of Seneca's contemporaries would have encountered the plays as texts for reading—not, though, for silent perusal, for it should be recalled that "throughout antiquity books were written to be read aloud, and that even private reading often took on some of the characteristics of a modulated declamation."[80] Perhaps only in those private performances could ancient readers—or their modern counterparts—appreciate the language of Senecan drama in all its intricate richness.

77 This is not to deny the possibility that the plays *were* acted in Seneca's lifetime, perhaps for small audiences in great private houses or at court (as suggested by W. M. Calder III, *CP* 70 [1975], 32–35).

78 See Fantham, 240–41 (arguing that Seneca wrote with recitation in mind); elsewhere (48) she tentatively suggests that Seneca read only selected passages of the plays, or else gave dramatic readings in cooperation with others. Both ideas have their attractions but also their difficulties: there is no evidence for recitation by more than one reader (as Fantham notes, 47), and on her own showing this division of roles would not remove all the awkwardnesses of a recited performance; on the other hand, a recitation that omitted rapid exchanges of dialogue like *Med.* 158–73 or *Thy.* 248–60 would deprive the plays of some of their most sensational and effective passages.

79 A point well stressed by Fantham, 48–49.

80 E. J. Kenney in *CHLL*, 11.

BACKGROUNDS TO SENECAN TRAGEDY

Seneca's position as the only Roman tragedian whose works have survived complete has often caused his plays to be interpreted exclusively as Roman equivalents of classical Greek tragedy. Even when such comparisons are made without prejudice, they can give only a partial impression of Senecan drama's peculiar character, since they neglect the important non-theatrical elements in Seneca's background: his rhetorical training, his philosophical interests, and his profound familiarity with Augustan poetry. The following pages try to show briefly what each of these has contributed to the unique amalgam that is Senecan tragedy.

The Dramatic Tradition

A Roman writing in the middle of the first century A.D. could look back on half a millennium of tragic drama, from the "classical" period of Greek tragedy in the fifth century B.C., dominated then as now by the figures of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides, to the development of Roman tragedy under their influence in the second and first centuries B.C., and finally to the mature Roman tragedy of the Augustan period. Just how much Seneca knew of these earlier phases of dramatic history and in what ways they shaped his own approach to tragedy are still matters of dispute.[81] Seneca's prose works reveal only a limited and superficial acquaintance with earlier drama, but this might be simply one more way in which Seneca's moral writing fails to disclose the full range of his knowledge or interests. On the evidence of the plays themselves, most scholars today believe that Seneca had read widely in both Greek and Roman tragedy and that his use of his predecessors was eclectic and independent.

Certainly Seneca's tragedies are not translations or even free adaptations of Greek models, like the comedies of Plautus and Terence or the tragedies written in the Republican period by Ennius, Pacuvius, and Accius. Seneca looked to the Greek classics for plots, characters, and general notions of dramatic treatment, but in the writing of individual scenes and even in larger matters of structure and organization his plays are essentially original compositions.

In particular Seneca's ideas of dramatic form do not derive immediately from classical Greek tragedy.[82] On a number of points Senecan dramatic technique is closer to that of fourth-century New Comedy than

[81] Short discussion and bibliography in my edition of *Agamemnon*, 8–14. I have modified some of the views expressed there, partly in response to the criticism of C. J. Herington, *Phoenix* 32 (1978), 270–75. Fantham, 3–9, offers a brief survey of Roman tragedy up to and including Seneca's time.

[82] This and the following paragraph summarize arguments elaborated in *HSCP* 82 (1978), 213–63.

to the practice of fifth-century tragedy; not because Seneca was directly influenced by Comedy, but because Comedy, being better preserved than the tragedy of the same period, reveals the direction in which both forms were evolving in the fourth and third centuries B.C. The most obvious of these features is the five-act structure that Senecan tragedy usually observes, a Hellenistic canon of form prescribed by Horace in his *Ars Poetica* (189–90) and shown by papyrus discoveries to have been standard in the comedies of Menander. This stricter concept of dramatic structure coincides with a change in the use of the Chorus: in Seneca the Chorus retains some vestiges of its former role as an actor—it takes part in dialogue if there is no second actor to do so, as in Act IV of *Thyestes* (623–788)—, but on the whole its function is confined to dividing the acts by choral odes, and Seneca often seems to treat it as absent during the dialogue portions, like the interlude-chorus of New Comedy. The parallel with Comedy also includes some stage conventions, such as the extended aside (cf. *Thy.* 491–507) and the monologue by an entering character which is not heard by others on stage and so can be considered almost a soliloquy (cf. *Thy.* 404–20, 423–28).

Seneca probably encountered these and other post-classical elements of dramatic technique in the work of earlier Roman tragedians, either Republican or Augustan. In some respects, though, the form of Senecan tragedy bears an unmistakable post-Augustan stamp. The debt of the Augustans is clearest in the area of meter: Seneca's dialogue meter is the iambic trimeter of Ovid and Varius, not the looser *senarius* of Republican drama, and many of his choral lyrics are drawn from the *Odes* of Horace. (See below, pp. 31–32). Seneca may well have known and occasionally imitated the work of the Republican dramatists—he can hardly have failed to appreciate the rhetorical vigor of Accius—, but it seems likely that the Augustans decisively influenced his notions of how a tragedy should look and sound.

Augustan Poetry[83]

The part played by Ovid, Varius, and their contemporaries in shaping Seneca's ideas of tragedy was only one of the ways in which Augustan

[83] The links between Senecan tragedy and Augustan poetry have never been systematically explored, and almost all existing discussions are narrowly focused and uncritical in method. These include: B. ter Haar Romeny, *De auctore tragoediarum quae sub Senecae nomine feruntur, Vergilii imitatore* (diss. Leiden, 1877), J. Spika, *De imitatione Horatiana in Senecae canticis chori* (Programmrede, Vienna, 1890), H. L. Cleasby, *De Seneca tragico Ovidii imitatore* (diss. Harvard, 1907), J. Charlier, *Ovide et Sénèque. Contributions à l'étude de l'influence d'Ovide sur les tragédies de Sénèque* (diss. Brussels, 1954), C. K. Kapnukajas, *Die Nachahmungstechnik Senecas in den Chorliedern des Hercules Furens und der Medea* (diss. Leipzig, 1930), R. B. Steele, "Some Roman Elements in the Tragedies of Seneca," *AJP* 43 (1922), esp. 15–23.

poetry affected his work. Seneca's memory was filled with phrases and lines from Vergil, Horace, and Ovid, and the influence exerted on him by these Roman "classics" was deep and pervasive. The Augustans, though, offered Seneca much more than a quarry of poetic diction and phraseology. A more general debt to Augustan epic—to the *Aeneid* and the *Metamorphoses*—can be seen in the narrative passages in which Senecan drama so notably abounds; in extended reports such as the great storm in *Agamemnon* (421–578) or Hercules' journey to the underworld in *HF* (658–829), and also in curiously full descriptions of on-stage action such as *Med.* 382–90 or *Ag.* 710–19. When Seneca's characters denounce extravagance and luxury or praise the simple life, they regularly do so in images taken from Horace's *Odes*;[84] Horatian coloring is especially strong in the choral lyrics, where it is often heightened by metrical similarity. Augustan poetry also provided models of characterization: Seneca's portrayals of emotionally divided characters draw repeatedly on Vergil's depiction of Dido in *Aeneid* IV[85] and also on the passionate women of Ovid's *Heroides* and *Metamorphoses*,[86] and Ovid's story of Procne and Tereus (*Met.* 6.424–674, especially 609–66) contributed much to Seneca's treatment of Atreus' revenge—in fact, Seneca goes so far as to make Atreus himself seem aware of the parallel (cf. 272–77).

Seneca's verbal borrowings from Augustan poetry are of several kinds. Many isolated verbal echoes were probably not meant to be noticed by an audience, and indeed Seneca himself may not have been aware of them as borrowings. An example of this sort of fleeting echo is Tantalus' question *in quod malum transcribor?* (13), which resembles a line of Ovid's *Ibis* (187) where *transcribere* is used of "re-assigning" the punishments of notorious underworld figures.[87] In a number of places, though, Seneca alludes to his Augustan predecessors in a way that seems to invite comparison. When the Fury prays that Tantalid children "die evilly and be still more wickedly born" (*liberi pereant male, / peius tamen nascantur*, 41–42), her words carry added force for the reader or listener who recognizes them as Seneca's "capping" of Manilius' epigram on the children of Medea, *male conceptos partus peiusque necatos* (3.13); similarly, Atreus' prediction that dire poverty will overcome Thyestes' reluctance to return home, *egestas tristis ac durus labor / . . . subigent virum* (303–304), will only make its full impact if it is seen as a knowing adaptation of a famous line from the *Georgics*: *labor omnia vicit / improbus et duris urgens in rebus egestas* (1.145–46).[88]

[84] See notes on, e.g., *Thy.* 350–57, 452, *Ag.* 96, 105.

[85] E. Fantham, *Greece and Rome* 22 (1975), 1–10.

[86] Some references in Costa's notes on *Med.* 863–65, 926ff., 939ff., Fantham on *Tro.* 642–62, my notes on *Ag.* 132ff., *HSCP* 82 (1978), 262–63.

[87] For other examples see notes on 66–67, 80, 152, 173, 337, 567–71, 655–56.

[88] See also notes on, e.g., 104, 117–18, 144, 319, 399, 707–11, 865–66, 1010 and below, p. 21, for similar adaptation of language from declamatory sources (note too Sen. *Contr.* 2.2.8, *Suas.* 3.4–7, 6.27 for instances of conscious imitation of earlier writers).

Sometimes the relationship between Seneca's text and an Augustan model is yet more complex: not only is the allusion meant to be observed, but the differences of tone or point of reference between the original and Seneca's revision are an integral part of Seneca's meaning.[89] The most telling example in *Thyestes* comes at the start of the Messenger's report (641–64), where the palace of Atreus is described in terms clearly meant to recall the palace-temple of Latinus in *Aeneid* 7.170–91—except that what in Vergil was a symbol of benign and venerable authority appears in Seneca as a monument to crime and tyranny. Once the connection is noticed, and once a reader or listener recalls that Vergil's account was seen as a tacit allusion to Augustus' palace on the Palatine, it is hard not to infer that Seneca too is making an implicit comment on contemporary Rome, and that his evocation of Vergil bitterly points up the gap between Augustan ideals and the imperial realities of his own time.[90]

Declamation Oratory[91]

Near the end of the Republican era, an important change was taking place in the Roman system of education. It had for some time been the practice for young men, after learning the basics of reading and writing and spending several years in the study of Greek and Latin literature, to complete their formal schooling with a training in rhetoric. The rhetorical education of Cicero's time was essentially practical, aimed at developing the skills needed for effective speaking in a courtroom or deliberative assembly; it included exercises in arguing general propositions, or "theses" (e.g., "should a man marry?" or "is it ever right to tell a lie?"), and others based on actual or invented situations from law, history, or mythology (sometimes called *causae*), but these were considered merely preliminary to the true practice of oratory, which required direct experience of the conditions of public speaking. The shift of emphasis which took hold in the early Augustan period and which remained dominant for several generations thereafter entailed a narrowing of the range of

[89] This style of "intertextual" or allusive reading is well established in current criticism of Latin poetry from Catullus to Ovid; for example, it informs much of D. O. Ross, Jr.'s book *Backgrounds to Augustan Poetry: Gallus, Elegy, and Rome* (Cambridge, 1975), and for a recent specimen of the approach cf. R. F. Thomas, "Catullus and the Polemics of Poetic Reference," *AJP* 103 (1982), 144–64. Its revelance to post-Augustan literature has not been overlooked (Lucan's inverted references to the *Aeneid* being an obvious instance), but much remains to be done.

[90] See notes *ad loc.* and for other examples see on 40–45, 369–79, 958, 134, 252–53, 269–70, 409–10, 804–12.

[91] The standard treatment is S. F. Bonner, *Roman Declamation* (Berkeley, 1949), which may now be complemented by D. A. Russell, *Greek Declamation* (Cambridge, 1983).

techniques and a more "scholastic" approach; becoming more and more detached from the realities of courtroom or Senate, it cultivated fluency and cleverness to the detriment of solid argument, genuine persuasiveness, or simple common sense. Two forms of exercise claimed the bulk of the student's attention: the *controversia*, or invented legal case about which arguments were to be constructed for both prosecution and defense, and the *suasoria*, in which a figure of history or mythology was given advice for or against a particular course of action (e.g., "should the Spartans at Thermopylae retreat?" or "should Cicero save his life by burning his speeches against Antony?"). The cases chosen for *controversiae* showed a marked preference for the unlikely and the lurid, being largely populated by disinherited children, rapists, and pirates in dizzying combinations.[92] In both *controversia* and *suasoria* the search for novelty led to ever greater extremes of contrivance and forced subtlety; these tendencies were aggravated by the public character of declamatory exhibitions, at which leading practitioners would vie for the applause of the assembled students and guests.

The effects of declamatory training on Latin literature can be seen as early as Ovid, who was himself a skilled performer in the *suasoria*, but they are perhaps nowhere more evident than in the writings of Seneca and his father. The elder Seneca arrived in Rome in the late 40s B.C., just as the new rhetorical style was gaining acceptance, and came immediately under its spell; seventy years later, he drew on his prodigious memory and his unquenchable zest for the form to compile an invaluable collection of *controversiae* and *suasoriae*, packed with substantial citations from scores of declaimers and punctuated by his own pithy and sometimes penetrating criticisms. The work was carefully studied by his son Lucius, and this encyclopaedic knowledge of declamation can only have strengthened the impact that his own rhetorical education had made on his style.

Seneca's declamatory background reveals itself in several ways. The most obvious is near-verbatim borrowing of *mots* from his father's collection, often with an attempt to improve on the original.[93] The declaimer-poet Cornelius Severus had tried to capture the mood of soldiers on the eve of battle, enjoying what might be their last meal: "stretched out on the grass, they said 'this day is mine,'" *hic meus est . . . dies* (i.e., this day at least belongs to me, whatever tomorrow

[92] A particularly choice specimen (*Contr.* 1.7): "The Tyrannicide the Pirates Let Go. [Children must support their parents, or be imprisoned.] A man killed one of his brothers, a tyrant. The other brother he caught in adultery and killed despite the pleas of his father. Captured by pirates, he wrote to his father about a ransom. The father wrote a letter to the pirates, saying that he would give double if they cut off his hands. The pirates let him go. The father is in need; the son is not supporting him." (Winterbottom's translation.)

[93] Cf. Leo, *Obs.*, 152–53, *Ag.* 35–36 (n).

may bring; *Suas.* 2.12). Seneca turned this rather lame epigram to a much more interesting purpose in his *Medea*, where the title character has been given a day's grace before going into exile and takes the opportunity to destroy her husband's new wife and to kill her own two children. As she prepares to murder the second child, she urges herself to enjoy her revenge to the full, without haste: *meus dies est, tempore accepto utimur* (1017). For the reader or listener who caught the allusion, the bold twist given to Severus' phrase would deepen the chilling impact of Medea's words.

A more general legacy of declamation, and one that Seneca shares with many other writers of the Empire, is an attraction to certain moralizing themes (called *loci communes* or "commonplaces"), such as the caprice of Fortune or the anxieties of city life;[94] Thyestes' praise of poverty in Act III (446–70) is clearly indebted to this practice. Seneca also shows the influence of another form of declamatory set-piece, the extended description of a scene; a storm, for example, or a lavish palace, a tyrant's torture-chamber or a drunken orgy.[95] The prominence given these genre-scenes helps to account for the length of the *descriptiones* in Seneca's messenger-speeches, of which *Thy.* 641–82 is an outstanding example.[96]

The most important effect of declamation oratory on Seneca, though, is stylistic. The declaimer often had to address themes that had become threadbare from repeated handling, to catch and hold the attention of an experienced or even jaded audience. As a result, the declamatory style was noted above all for its frequent and sharply pointed epigrams, or *sententiae*. A *sententia* need not be a gnomic statement, although many *sententiae* were in generalizing form, like Atreus' pronouncement that "you only avenge crimes by outdoing them" (*scelera non ulciscēris, / nisi vincis*, *Thy.* 195–96). The essential element is an arresting use of language, often with a paradoxical shift of meaning or a parallelism that couples ideas not normally combined. Examples can be found in almost every Latin writer of the Empire. There is Ovid's Narcissus who, when he discovers he is in love with his own reflection, utters "an unprecedented wish for a lover—I wish that I and my beloved were apart" (*Met.* 3.467 *votum in amante novum—vellem quod amamus abesset*); or Lucan's description of Rome under the Triumvirs as "a condominium with three owners" (1.85 *facta tribus dominis communis Roma*); or Juvenal's way of asserting the security of the poor, "the empty-handed traveler can whistle in the robber's face" (10.22 *cantabit vacuus coram latrone viator*); or Tacitus' summing-up of the emperor Galba, "no one would have doubted his ability

[94] Bonner, 60–62.

[95] Bonner, 58–60.

[96] Note also, for example, the enormous storm-narrative in *Ag.* 421–578 (the centerpiece of the play in more than one sense) and the underworld-description in *HF* 658–829.

to rule, had he never been emperor" (*Hist.* 1.49.4 *omnium consensu capax imperii, nisi imperasset*). As for Seneca, every page of his prose works could supply instances. Two almost at random: the account of mid-day gladiatorial games in *Epist.* 7.3, introduced with the remark "all the previous [i.e., morning] combats were acts of mercy" (*quidquid ante pugnatum est, misericordia fuit*; cf. *Med.* 903–904, *Thy.* 744–45), and the delightfully apt comment on Cicero's praise of his consulship—"not without cause, but without end" (*non sine causa, sed sine fine, BV* 5.1).

The declamatory element in Seneca's writing has been largely responsible for the loss of favor he has suffered in the last century; in particular it lies behind the dismissive characterization of his work as "rhetorical." To an extent these negative reactions may be justified. Seneca's fondness for pointed *sententiae* can give his prose a static, disjointed quality (Caligula's "sand without lime"), and his strokes of verbal brilliance, at first invigorating, can become wearisome through sheer abundance (hence Macaulay's remark that reading Seneca in large quantities was "like living on nothing but anchovy sauce").[97]

Like Ovid, Seneca was often unable or unwilling to restrain his extraordinary cleverness, but, again like Ovid, he could use his rhetorical skill with greater subtlety than he is usually given credit for. His tragic style fully exploits the *sententia*'s capabilities as a structural device, varying the pace of long speeches and siting the strongest epigrams for maximum effect. In *Thyestes* he goes still further, and makes the contrast between Atreus' and Thyestes' use of the pointed style an indicator of the differences in their temperaments.[98]

Stoic Philosophy[99]

Seneca's prose works contain not the slightest hint that he was also a tragedian. The reverse, however, is not true: the tragedies are unmistakably the work of a writer imbued with Seneca's particular philosophical

[97] "Essay on Bacon" (1836), quoted in W. C. Summers's Macmillan edition of *Select Letters* (London, 1910), cxii. I relegate to the decent obscurity of a footnote the more pungent verdict of Dr. Kettel, a seventeenth-century President of Trinity College, Oxford, who, according to John Aubrey, "was wont to say that Seneca writes as a Boare does pisse, *scilicet* by jirkes." It is interesting that attacks on Seneca's style from Caligula onwards have been couched in vivid metaphors of which Seneca himself might have strongly approved.

[98] Below, 44–45.

[99] For other brief treatments and surveys of earlier work see Fantham, 15–24; N. T. Pratt, *Seneca's Drama* (Chapel Hill, 1983), 73–81; M. Coffey, *Lustrum* 2 (1958), 151–60 (especially useful on German scholarship 1925–1955). [Add now E. Lefèvre, "Die philosophische Bedeutung der Seneca-Tragödie am Beispiel des 'Thyestes'," *ANRW* II.32.1 (due to appear in 1985).] The most accessible discussions of Stoic doctrine in English are J. M. Rist, *Stoic Philosophy* (Cambridge, 1969); F. H. Sandbach, *The Stoics* (London, 1975); and Pratt, *op. cit.*, 35–72.

outlook. The importance of philosophy in Senecan drama has long been acknowledged, though described in very different ways: in the last forty years the plays have been analyzed both as a systematic exposition of Stoic doctrine and as an indictment of Stoicism's failure to account for the world as it is.[100] Philosophical readings of the tragedies, whatever their direction, have often been reductive, slighting the plays' poetic elements and taking too little account of Seneca's exuberant philosophical eclecticism. It may be more useful to speak of basic concerns common to the dramatist and the philosopher.

For Seneca, philosophy was essentially a moral rather than a metaphysical pursuit. Its object was to show human beings the way to live, to insulate them from the disturbances of the world outside and the still more threatening forces within them, and above all to teach them to accept and even to welcome their inevitable death. Ethical concerns are also at the heart of Senecan drama: a chorus of the *Oedipus* may describe destiny in orthodox Stoic terms as "an intertwined chain of causes" (*quae nexa suis currunt causis*, 990), and the last ode of the *Thyestes* may picture the end of the world as postulated by Stoic physics (830–74), but it is in their attitudes to human behavior that the tragedies most clearly show the imprint of Seneca's version of Stoicism.

The central issue of Senecan moral philosophy is the control of the passions (*affectus*) and the attainment of inner peace through rational conformity with nature; this emotional control allows those who possess it to confront all misfortune with courage and equanimity. But although Seneca has left several impressive descriptions of the Stoic ideal or *sapiens*, the bulk of his moral writing is concerned with those who in various ways fall short of that goal. Seneca has few rivals, ancient or modern, in the observation of neurosis—of the divisive and crippling effects of desire, fear, and above all anger, the most destructive of the passions and the subject of Seneca's most extended study of emotional pathology, the treatise *De ira*.[101]

This fascination with the dark corners of the psyche is also evident in Senecan tragedy; the opportunity to portray human beings under extreme emotional pressure may in fact have been tragedy's strongest attraction for Seneca. In any event he takes full advantage of drama's potential for exploring psychological conflict. There is, of course, nothing specifically Stoic in depicting the struggle of reason and passion; this is a leading theme both in Euripides and in the two greatest works of Augustan literature, the

[100] The approaches, respectively, of B. Marti, "Seneca's Tragedies: A New Interpretation," *TAPA* 76 (1945), 216–45, and J. Dingel, *Seneca und die Dichtung* (Heidelberg, 1974).

[101] For parallels between the analysis of *ira* in this treatise and Seneca's dramatic portrayal of passion, see notes on 190–91, 267–86, 268, 283–84; also K. Trabert, *Studien zur Darstellung des Pathologischen in den Tragödien des Seneca* (diss. Erlangen, 1953).

Aeneid and the *Metamorphoses*. What Stoicism contributed to Seneca's handling of the issue was a greater precision of psychological analysis and an enlarged conception of passion's destructive capability. His characters' souls are anatomized in a detail never before attempted, not even by Ovid or Euripides; as they agonize over a fateful decision they are shown, as it were, in slow motion, and allowed to note the symptoms of their condition with clinical exactness.[102] Seneca's choice of characters also shows a strong predilection for the deviant. The *sapiens* is glimpsed only at a distance, in an off-stage figure like Astyanax in *Troades* or in passages of choral lyric (cf., e.g., *Thy.* 348–90, a reflection on the Stoic concept of the *sapiens* as true king). For his central figures, Seneca turns to the interesting failure or the complex maladjustment. He devotes special attention to divided characters, people with some claim to virtue or at least some stirrings of principle who must contend with the temptations of the world or of their own emotions.[103] In most cases the struggle ends in defeat: Phaedra is overcome by her untamed desires, Hippolytus by his refusal to accept adult sexuality, Clytaemestra by her weakness, Agamemnon (in *Troades*) and Theseus by their need to assert authority, Andromache by her attachment to her loved ones, Thyestes by his susceptibility to the rewards of power. Only Hercules in *HF*, after confronting the violent forces within himself and his still more devastating sense of guilt, arrives in the end at what seems to be a victory of survival.[104] A special place is occupied by two protagonists, Medea and Atreus, who represent what might be called a Stoic's nightmare, the human person fully under the control of the madness of *ira*. These figures act with a resolution and single-mindedness that make them perverted mirror-images of the *sapiens*, and just as the *sapiens* achieves a sort of divinity through perfect harmony with the divine order of the universe, so these characters concentrate into themselves a power of evil that is literally cosmic in its destructive effects.[105]

What was Seneca trying to accomplish with these portraits of disturbed and even deranged personalities? The most likely answer is that he was exploiting the emotional directness of dramatic poetry to make

[102] Cf. *Pha.* 177–85, *Ag.* 131–40, *Med.* 926–28, 939–44, *Tro.* 642–62, *Thy.* 267–86.

[103] In Stoic terms several of these characters might qualify as *proficientes* or "those making progress," i.e., toward wisdom. Seneca provides a typology of this class in *Epist.* 75.8–18; his description of the *secundum genus* (13 *qui et maxima mala et adfectus deposuerunt, sed ita ut non sit illis securitatis suae certa possessio; possunt enim in eadem relabi*) is especially appropriate to Thyestes, cf. Lefèvre (above, n. 99).

[104] Even this is not beyond dispute, cf. J. G. Fitch, *Hermes* 117 (1979), 240–48.

[105] "Literally cosmic" because Stoics thought of the universe as a single organism, all of which could be affected by a violent disturbance at any particular point. Ancient evidence on this doctrine (known as *sympatheia*) is collected in Pease's notes on Cic. *Div.* 2.34, *N.D.* 3.28; it was applied to the understanding of Senecan drama in an important article by Otto Regenbogen, "Schmerz und Tod in den Tragödien Senecas," *Vorträge der Bibliothek Warburg 1927/8*, 167–218 (= *Kleine Schriften* [Munich, 1961], 411–64.

his audiences feel the appalling consequences of passion, that the shock and revulsion aroused by his most effective scenes were meant to be the stimulus to moral awareness and growth.[106] This explanation may correspond with Seneca's own understanding of his motives, but it omits one significant fact. Seneca's most terrifyingly evil characters, Medea and Atreus, are also his most memorable dramatic creations.[107] There is something splendid about their energy and force of personality, shown above all in their unflagging mastery of language; next to them their victims, though morally more complex, seem pallid or contemptible. The fascination exerted by powerful evil is a recurring phenomenon in literature (Lucan's Caesar and Milton's Satan are two of the better-known instances); it is striking proof of the commonplace that a work of art can never be fully accounted for by the artist's conscious intentions. Seneca's Stoic convictions may have led him to probe the extremes of human behavior, but his artistic response to that challenge contains more than was dreamt of in his philosophy.[108]

STYLISTIC FEATURES

No comprehensive study of the style of Senecan tragedy has yet been made,[109] and this would indeed be a formidable task, since Seneca's tragic style does not lend itself to simple characterization. Despite Seneca's extensive debt to Ovid, for example, his poetry resembles Ovid's hardly at all, except for a shared delight in brilliant elaboration of ideas. Even Seneca's own prose makes a clearer and more distinct impression than his dramatic poetry. The tendencies that dominate the prose works—epigrammatic brevity, directness, lack of complex subordination, use of colloquial language—can all be paralleled in the tragedies, but there they form part of a richer and more complex stylistic repertory. Seneca's tragic diction encompasses both high-flown grandiosity reminiscent of Accius and also the plainest of everyday

[106] For Seneca's views on the moral value of poetry, cf. W. S. Maguinness, "Seneca and the Poets," *Hermathena* 88 (1956), 81–98. This interpretation of Senecan drama has been especially popular in German scholarship of the last half-century; see for example, F. Egermann, "Seneca als Dichterphilosoph," *Neue Jahrbücher* 3 (1940), 18–36, U. Knoche, "Senecas Atreus, Ein Beispiel," *Das Antike* 17 (1941), 60–76, and (with greater sophistication) much of the work of Eckard Lefèvre.

[107] Fantham, 18.

[108] The sympathy that Seneca evokes for some emotionally disturbed characters (Phaedra, for example) is another indication that his plays cannot be understood in narrowly moralistic terms.

[109] Seneca's use of tropes and figures has been exhaustively catalogued by Canter, and there is much information on his syntax and morphology in Fantham, 92–103 (along with some brief, but well-chosen remarks of a more general nature on pages 33–34); much of Gordon Williams, *Change and Decline* (Berkeley, 1978), 213–32 is also relevant to Seneca.

speech, and his phrasing similarly ranges from near-periodic fullness to the clipped and even fragmentary.[110] Such extremes could be accommodated within a style that nonetheless gave an overall impression of consistency, but this does not appear to have been Seneca's aim; in many places it seems that jarring shifts in linguistic level are part of the intended effect. In Thyestes' last long speech, for example, the juxtaposition of the rolling period *tu, summe caeli rector . . . fulminibus exple* (1077–87) and the disjointed phrases that follow (*causa . . . mala sit mea* 1087–88) is as startling as the contrast between the grandiloquence of *trisulco flammeam telo facem / per pectus hoc transmitte* (1089–90) and the prosiness of the nearby *si minus* (1089) and *nil queror* (1095). The significance of these variations in particular passages is open to dispute,[111] but their presence is beyond question. At a more general level, Seneca's frequent use of pointed expressions (*sententiae*)[112] produces a comparable result. To be successful, a *sententia* must carry a higher verbal charge than the surrounding context and must to some extent take the audience by surprise. Seneca often heightens these effects by preceding *sententiae* with unpointed lead-in lines and following them with a new start at a lower level of intensity, thus increasing the listener's sense of discontinuity and inequality.[113]

Fluidity of linguistic level is one of several aspects of Senecan poetry which require a complex response from its audience. Another is Seneca's tendency to cross clear physical images with more abstract or conceptual[114] terms, as when Tantalus describes his punishment as that of "parched thirst" and "gaping hunger" (4–6 *siti / arente, fame / hiante*), with *sitis* and *fames* appearing instead of, e.g., *guttur* and *os*. Some of these passages mingle description and analysis, replacing an object or action with a term that points up its significance or result, e.g., 777 *merseris . . . diem* [= *solem*], 743 *per utrumque vulnus moritur* [= *sanguinem effundit*], 1044 *ferro liberis detur via* [= *ferro pectus reseretur*]. In others the speaker's emotions drive out purely descriptive language, as when Atreus uses *generis invisi indoles* to mean "Thyestes' children" (492) or when Thyestes refers to the flesh of his sons within his body as a *clusum nefas* struggling to get free (1041). Similar effects are produced when figurative and literal language are coupled in unexpected ways, e.g., 819–20 *fumantes . . . iubas mergere ponto* and

110 For examples of these extremes see, e.g., 74–81, 225–35 versus 321.

111 I have suggested that in this case the stylistic inconsistency underscores Thyestes' failure to control his situation; by contrast the sudden changes of level at 245–46 and 784–88 seem to reflect the speaker's full command of language.

112 For definition and examples see above, pp. 21–22.

113 See notes on 11–12, 192, 205, 417–20, 917–18, 1050, 1067. This feature of the *sententia* was pointed out by Quintilian: *subsistit omnis sententia ideoque post eam utique aliud est initium* (8.5.27).

114 This useful term is Fantham's (34).

840–41 *vincet . . . sui / fratris habenas*, where the synecdoches *iuba* = *equus* and *habenae* = *currus* are thrown into bizarre prominence by the surrounding words.[115] On occasion both literal and non-literal senses are simultaneously present, in a form of *double entendre*. One of Atreus' most powerful lines is of this kind, when he pictures his revenge as *ingesta orbitas / in ora patris* (282–83); Atreus here anticipates both a physical act ("thrusting Thyestes' dead children into his mouth") and its psychological consequences ("hurling his childlessness in his face," cf. 890–91). (This is only one variety of *double entendre*, a device that Seneca often uses as a vehicle for irony, both conscious and unconscious, and which is largely responsible for the impression of density that his dramatic style creates.[116])

The product of these traits is a style that is paradoxically compressed yet ornate and elaborate, rich in sensory and emotive stimuli but often lacking in clear pictorial images.[117] For an audience it is a demanding, even a wearying style; only the occasional passage of choral lyric offers a respite from the relentless pressure, and these moments of relaxation (such as the end of the second chorus, 391–403) are as a result all the more welcome. For the troubled characters who populate Seneca's plays, however, this intense, restless, and discordant style is a natural medium of expression.

METER[118]

The basic metrical division in Senecan tragedy, as in its Greek antecedents, is between spoken ("dialogue") and sung ("lyric") sections. The lyric element comprises the choral odes and the occasional arias (or "monodies") sung by individual characters, such as Thyestes' drinking-song in the last act of this play (920–69). All other parts of the play are in dialogue meter.

Dialogue

The dialogue meter of Senecan drama is essentially that used by the Greek tragedians, with a number of differences in detail. It is based on

115 See also notes on 787 *ab ortu*, 861 *pinnata . . . spicula*.

116 For some examples see on 431–33, 928–33, 971–72, 982–83. The greatest concentration of *double entendres* is found in the first meeting of Atreus and Thyestes, where they function as a verbal sign of the uneasy relations of the brothers; cf. 510–11, 530–31, 535, 539, 544–45.

117 These features, plus the cultivation of "unnatural" perspectives mentioned earlier, largely account for the label "mannerist" that has been applied to Seneca's writing in recent criticism; see on 152–75 for further discussion and examples.

118 This sketch is intended only as a practical aid to reading and scansion; for fuller expositions of Senecan metrical practice see Fantham, 104–15; Zwierlein, *Prolegomena*, 182–230; L. Strzelecki, *De Senecae trimetro iambico quaestiones selectae* (Cracow, 1938). On lyric meters see, e.g., D. S. Raven, *Latin Metre* (London, 1965), 133–50.

the iambus, a metrical unit consisting of two elements in the order short-long (⏑ –). The iambus has a metrical "beat" or *ictus* that falls on the long second element (sometimes marked ⏑ ´); this element is called the *arsis*, and the unstressed first element is known as the *thesis*. A full line of tragic dialogue is made up of six iambic "feet," and is therefore sometimes called a *senarius*, but Seneca's practice shows that, like the Greek dramatists, he thought of this meter as containing three pairs of iambi rather than six independent feet. Each pair of iambi (⏑ – ⏑ –) is called an iambic metron, and the entire line is thus referred to as an iambic trimeter.

A strict iambic trimeter would have the following form:

⏑ – ⏑ – | ⏑ – ⏑ – | ⏑ – ⏑ –

This pure form, however, is practically nonexistent in Senecan dialogue and literally does not occur in the whole of *Thyestes*. Just as the dactylic hexameter at several points allows a choice between a dactyl (– ⏑⏑) and a spondee (– –), so the iambic trimeter permits a wide range of choice between iambi and other metrical units. The patterns of variation are set out below; for ease of reference I shall occasionally speak of a trimeter as having twelve "elements" or "positions" (see the schema below).

There are two basic ways in which pure iambs can be replaced by other metrical forms: by substituting a long syllable for the short first syllable, or *thesis* (producing – – for ⏑ –), and by "resolving" a long syllable into its metrical equivalent of two short syllables (– = ⏑⏑). At some places in the trimeter both types of variation may operate within a single "foot": for example, at the beginning of the line (positions 1–2), as well as a pure iamb one may find a spondee (– –, with long *thesis*), an anapest (⏑⏑ –, with the long *thesis* resolved), a dactyl (– ⏑⏑, with long *thesis* and resolved *arsis*), or a proceleusmatic (⏑⏑⏑⏑, with both long *thesis* and *arsis* resolved).[119] A different form of substitution is limited to the last element (position 12), which may be either a long or a short syllable; in other words, the sixth "foot" of each trimeter may be either an iamb (⏑ –) or a pyrrhic (⏑⏑).[120] This final syllable is often called *anceps* (i.e., "doubtful" or "ambiguous" in quantity); in metrical notation it is indicated by an x.

Described in the abstract, the Senecan trimeter may sound dauntingly complex, but in practice the meter is not inordinately difficult. This is because substitutions are governed by certain clear guidelines and

[119] The proceleusmatic is restricted to the first metron and is very rare even there (only at 289 in *Thyestes*).

[120] A short syllable may have been permitted at the end of the line because a pause at this point (even if minimal or nonexistent in actual delivery) provided the necessary lengthening.

also because within the range of possible forms Seneca shows marked preferences for a few patterns which recur so often as to become quickly familiar.

The most important principle regulating Seneca's trimeters is the different treatment given to the two halves of the iambic metron. In the first half of each metron (i.e., in the first, third, and fifth "feet," or at positions 1, 5, and 9) the *thesis* is much more often long or resolved than short, whereas in the second half (i.e., in the second, fourth, and sixth "feet," or at positions 3, 7, and 11) a short *thesis* is mandatory and is never replaced by a long syllable or its resolved equivalent. [This is the single most striking difference between the Senecan trimeter and the *senarii* of early Latin tragedy. In Republican tragedy it is possible to replace an iamb with a spondee in every "foot" except the last, so that lines with the shape – – – – – – – – – – ⏑ – are not uncommon, cf., e.g., Acc. 411 R^2 *primum ex immani victum ad mansuetum applicans*. Seneca's restriction on the number of permissible spondees allows the iambic rhythms to be more clearly heard and also produces a less ponderous line.[121]] The final metron shows this difference between odd and even "feet" in its most pronounced form: Seneca virtually eliminates the short *thesis* in the first half (at position 9), permitting only the long and resolved forms, and also avoids resolution of the following *arsis* (position 10), so that the only possible patterns at the end of the line are – – ⏑ x and ⏑⏑ – ⏑ x.[122] The near-uniformity in the last metron, coming after the much more diverse patterns found earlier in the line, gives each verse the feeling of a strong close.[123]

Combining the fixed and variable elements of the Senecan trimeter yields the following complete schema:

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
⏑ / ⏑⏑	– / ⏑⏑	⏑	– / ⏑⏑	⏑ / ⏑⏑	– / ⏑⏑	⏑	– / ⏑⏑	– / ⏑⏑	—	⏑	⏑ / –

The best way to illustrate the particular forms favored by Seneca is to reproduce a short sketch of text with metrical notation. Here are the opening twelve lines of the *Thyestes*: resolved syllables are marked ⏑⏑ and elisions are indicated below the line (e.g. 1 *sede‿ab*). To the right of each line are references to one or two other lines in the play with the same metrical form; the figures in square brackets give the total number of

[121] It seems quite likely that this refinement was introduced by Augustan writers of tragedy, cf. *HSCP* 82 (1978), 258.

[122] Seneca here carries further a tendency seen in the *senarii* of Republican drama, where an iambic fifth "foot" is not favored, and is positively avoided when the sixth "foot" is filled by an iambic word or sense-unit—the so-called "Bentley-Luchs law."

[123] This effect is reinforced by certain restrictions on word-shape at the end of the trimeter, for which see Fantham, 105–106.

lines of this type in the *Thyestes*.[124]

1 Quis inferorum sede ab infausta extrahit (6, 16 [46])
2 avido fugaces ore captantem cibos, (21, 28 [61])
3 quis male deorum Tantalo visas domos (10, 14 [23])
4 ostendit iterum? peius inventum est siti (7–9, 11, 48 [29])
5 arente in undis aliquid et peius fame (25, 52 [47])
6 hiante semper? Sisyphi numquid lapis (= 1)
7 gestandus umeris lubricus nostris venit (= 4)
8 aut membra celeri differens cursu rota (= 4)
9 aut poena Tityi qui specu vasto patens (= 4)
10 visceribus atras pascit effossis aves (= 3)
11 et nocte reparans quidquid amisit die (= 4)
12 plenum recenti pabulum monstro iacet? (13, 15 [210])

The six patterns found in these lines account for more than half of all the trimeters in the play, and one of them (line 12), in which all the permitted substitutions of long for short syllables are made, occurs in more than a quarter of the play's dialogue. The most popular variety not seen in this sample shows resolution at the start of the third metron (position 9); as seen in line 24, *ūmbra ēt pĕnātēs ĭmpĭos fŭrĭīs ăgĕ*, it appears 69 times, with 19 further occurrences containing a pure iamb at the start of the first (13) or second (6) metron. The remaining forms can all be worked out on the basis of the principles outlined above.

Each of the twelve lines scanned here also exhibits the most common form of *caesura* (i.e., word-break within a metron) in Seneca's trimeters, after the first element of the second metron (= position 5). In metrical notation the *caesura* is marked by a double vertical line (‖): e.g., *quis inferorum* ‖ *sede*, etc. Line 13 contains the play's first example of the other (much less common) main form of *caesura*, in the fourth foot (= after position 7): *in quod malum transcribor?* ‖ *o*, etc. Both *caesurae* can also appear in the same line, as in 2: *avido fugaces* ‖ *ore* ‖ *captantem cibos*.

Because the Senecan trimeter leans so heavily toward spondaic rhythms where these are permitted, lines with several resolved long syllables stand out in contrast. Of the 14 trimeters in *Thyestes* containing

[124] The figures are based on a scansion of the text as printed in this edition, setting aside the incomplete line 100 and several other lines where the text is doubtful (47, 58, 272, 302, 745, and 1008); this leaves a total of 760 trimeters.

three or more resolutions, most coincide with moments of high emotion, where a sudden rush of short syllables effectively mirrors the feeling of the content. Note, e.g., 33 *rĕpĕtāntquĕ prŏfŭgōs; dŭbĭă vĭŏlēntāe dŏmūs*, in the Fury's vision of ceaseless crime, 267 *nēscĭoquĭd ănĭmūs māĭŭs ēt sŏlĭto āmplĭŭs*, as Atreus eagerly grasps the shape of his revenge, and 1040 *hōc ēst quŏd ăvĭdūs cāpĕrĕ nōn pŏtŭīt pătĕr*, as Thyestes despairingly surveys the remains of his children.

Lyric

Unlike his dialogue, Seneca's lyrics owe almost nothing of their form to their Greek antecedents. There is no trace in Seneca of the strophic responsion on which most Greek choral song is based. A few of his odes are constructed in stanzas, but for the most part Senecan lyrics are stichic—that is, a single basic meter is used in every line of a section or even an entire ode. The individual meters are based on Roman adaptations of Greek lyric patterns; Horace (the *Odes* in particular) seems to have been Seneca's most important model.

The lyrics of the *Thyestes* offer relatively few difficulties. Although four lyric meters appear in the play, three of them consist of a single pattern repeated without variation, and even the fourth does not approach the trimeter in the complexity of its form.

Chorus I (122–75)

First asclepiad: – – – ⏑⏑ – – ⏑⏑ – ⏑ x

This is the meter of Horace *C.* 1.1 (*Maecenas atavis*) and 3.30 (*Exegi monumentum*). As in Horace, there is consistent word-break after the sixth syllable.

122 Argos de superis si quis Achaicum
123 Pisaeasque domos curribus inclitas

Chorus II (336–403)

Glyconic: – – – ⏑⏑ – ⏑ x

Glyconics are not used by Horace as an independent metrical form, but they are a constituent element in several of his asclepiad-based stanzas, e.g., *C.* 1.5 (*Quis multa gracilis*), as the third line of each stanza: 3 *cui flavam religas comam.*

336 Tandem regia nobilis
337 antiqui genus Inachi

Chorus III (546–622)

Sapphic hendecasyllable: – ⏑ – – – ⏑⏑ – ⏑ – x
with an adonius in the final line (622): – ⏑⏑ – x

These are the constituents of Horace's sapphic stanza (as in, e.g., *C.* 1.22 *Integer vitae*), each of which comprises three hendecasyllables and an adonius. There is consistent word-break after the fifth syllable of the hendecasyllable (as is normal in Horace's first three books of *Odes*).

546 Crēdăt hŏc quīsquam? fĕrŭs īllĕ ĕt ācĕr
547 nĕc pŏtĕns mentis trŭcŭlentŭs Ātreus
622 tŭrbĭnĕ versat.

Chorus IV (789–884) and Thyestes' Monody (920–69)

Anapestic dimeter: ⏑⏑ – ⏑⏑ – | ⏑⏑ – ⏑⏑ x
with occasional monometers: ⏑⏑ – ⏑⏑ x (cf. 829, 969)

The anapaestic dimeter is Seneca's most popular lyric form and also the most varied in its patterns. Like the iambic trimeter, it is rarely seen in its pure form (in *Thyestes* only at 923, 938, and 968). Several substitutions are permitted, as follows: – for ⏑⏑ in each half of each metron, and ⏑⏑ for – in the first half of each metron. The complete scheme is therefore ⏑⏑ ⏑⏑ ⏑⏑ – | ⏑⏑ ⏑⏑ ⏑⏑ x (for the monometer ⏑⏑ ⏑⏑ ⏑⏑ x). Seneca does not, though, allow a run of four successive short syllables anywhere in the line, thereby avoiding the sequence dactyl-anapest (–⏑⏑ ⏑⏑–). For each metron, therefore, the possible combinations are (in order of decreasing frequency): dactyl-spondee (– ⏑⏑ – –), spondee-anapest (– – ⏑⏑ –), spondee-spondee(– – – –), anapest-anapest (⏑⏑ – ⏑⏑ –), and anapest-spondee (⏑⏑ – – –). Of these the first two are by far the most common, accounting for between half and three-fifths of the metra in these two sections of the play. Word-break between metra is consistently observed; elision and hiatus are avoided at this point.

Anapestic dimeters were used in Greek tragedy to accompany the first entrance of the Chorus (the *parodos*, cf., e.g., Aesch. *Ag.* 40–103) and also its departure from the orchestra at the end of the play (the *exodos*, cf., e.g., Eur. *Alc.* 1159–63); as a result they are sometimes called "marching anapests." The meter found a broader range of uses in Roman tragedy before Seneca, where it was employed both for choral odes at any point in the play (cf. Acc. 289–91 R^2) and for emotional arias (monodies) by individual actors; one of the two surviving lines of Ovid's *Medea* is from an anapestic monody sung by Medea: *feror huc illuc, ut plena deo* (cf. Sen. *Suas.* 3.7).

A short section of the final ode should suffice to illustrate the typical forms of Senecan anapests:

789 Quo, terrārum superumque parens, (SS AA)
790 cuius ad ortus noctis opacae (DS DS)
791 decus omne fugit, quo vertis iter (AA SA)
792 medioque diem perdis Olympo? (AA DS)
793 cur, Phoebe, tuos rapis aspectus? (SA AS)

[Note: for possible modifications of this view of Seneca's anapests, see Appendix I.]

LATER HISTORY OF THE TRAGEDIES[125]

At no time during the thirteen centuries after Seneca's death were his tragedies among the most popular works of Latin literature. Through the end of Antiquity, however, they seem to have been known to most well-educated writers, both pagans like Statius, Martial, Tacitus, Juvenal, and (probably) Claudian and Christians like Augustine, Jerome, and Sidonius Apollinaris. Indeed it was through the work of a Christian writer, in the many echoes of Seneca's choral odes in Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy*, that the words and themes of Senecan drama became most widely, though indirectly, familiar to the Middle Ages. From the sixth to the twelfth century the plays were almost entirely unknown; they re-emerge from the shadows only at the end of the twelfth century, in northern France and perhaps in circles associated with the University of Paris. Knowledge of the text first spread to England, then to Italy. By the end of the thirteenth century scholars in northern Italy were writing introductions to the plays and treatises on Senecan tragic meter; one of these early humanists, Albertino Mussato, also produced the first imitation of a Senecan drama since Antiquity, a tragedy of contemporary Italian politics called the *Ecerinis*. In the early fourteenth century knowledge of the tragedies grew beyond a narrow group of scholars. A sign of this wider acceptance is an exchange of letters from about the year 1314 between Cardinal Niccolò Albertino da Prato, a prominent figure at the court of Pope John XXII in Avignon, and Nicholas Trevet, a Dominican scholar resident at Blackfriars, Oxford; the cardinal noted the current interest in Senecan drama and asked Trevet to provide a full commentary that would make these unfamiliar and difficult works accessible to a broader educated public. Trevet's thorough, if numbingly elementary, gloss accomplished its purpose, and contributed to the great expansion of popularity the tragedies enjoyed for the next two centuries. Thousands of manuscript copies were turned out (mostly in Italy) of which several hundred still survive, and

[125] A slightly fuller account is given in *Texts and Transmission*, ed. L. D. Reynolds (Oxford, 1983), 378–81.

Senecan drama at last acquired the secure position of a standard text, the exemplar of ancient tragedy to be placed beside the long-established figures of Plautus and Terence. The itinerant players who arrive at Elsinore in the second act of *Hamlet*, for whom "Seneca cannot be too heavy nor Plautus too light" (2.2.400–401), typify the Renaissance view of Seneca's classic status.

It is not surprising that Senecan tragedy should have so deeply impressed readers of the later Middle Ages, when knowledge of Greek in Europe was quite limited and the Attic dramatists were little more than names. It is harder to explain why many of the most learned critics of the sixteenth century, who could make direct comparisons between Seneca and his Greek predecessors, accorded Senecan drama an esteem that now seems greatly exaggerated. The most influential treatise on poetry of the century, the *Poetices libri septem* of Julius Caesar Scaliger (Lyons, 1561), ranked Seneca as the equal of any of the Greeks in *maiestas* and as superior to Euripides in *cultus* and *nitor*.[126] Similar judgments were delivered by other eminent theorists of the time. One of these, Giovanni Battista Giraldi Cintio, gives an especially clear idea of what the high Renaissance prized so highly in Seneca: in a treatise of 1543, Giraldi writes that Seneca surpassed all the Greeks in "prudence, gravity, decorum, dignity, and *sententiae*," and in a comparison of Seneca's *Troades* with Euripides' play he gives Seneca higher marks for "majesty, the depiction of the emotions, the observation of behavior, and the liveliness of the *sententiae*."[127] The recurring stress on "gravity" and "majesty," on elegance (*cultus*) and point (*sententiae*), shows that the sixteenth-century preference for Seneca was largely based on stylistic familiarity; to writers whose taste had been formed by Latin models, Seneca's command of rhetorical technique and the overt moralizing of his lyrics made him seem accessible and therefore attractive. His clearly articulated dramatic structure would also have commended him to an age in which Horace's *Ars Poetica* and overliteral readings of Aristotle's *Poetics* constituted the dominant canons of dramatic form.

The influence of Senecan drama was as strong in sixteenth-century England as it was on the Continent, though the forms it took were different.[128] Besides being studied and imitated in learned circles, at the

[126] "Seneca . . . quem nullo Graecorum maiestate inferiorem existimo; cultu vero ac nitore etiam Euripide maiorem" (*Poet.* VI.6).

[127] *Discorso . . . intorno al comporre delle comedie e delle tragedie*, ed. C. G. Crocetti (Milan, 1973), 184, 205, 210.

[128] Among the most useful of the many treatments of Senecan influence in this period are the introduction to J. W. Cunliffe's *Early English Classical Tragedies* (Oxford, 1912); F. L. Lucas, *Seneca and Elizabethan Tragedy* (Cambridge, 1927); T. S. Eliot's essay "Seneca in Elizabethan Translation," reprinted in *Selected Essays* (London, 1951), 65–105; and C. J. Herington's essay "Senecan Tragedy," *Arion* 5 (1966), 422–71.

Universities and the Inns of Court, Seneca's plays also exerted a direct influence on the popular theater, in part through a series of translations by various hands published between 1559 and 1567 and reprinted in collected form in 1581. In their flamboyant sound-effects and pounding rhythms, these translations are vivid evidence of the freshness with which the early Elizabethans responded to Seneca's poetry. Here, for example, is Jasper Heywood's version of *Thy.* 9–10 *aut poena Tityi, semper accrescens iecur / visceribus atras pascit effossis aves*: "or shal my paynes be Tytius panges th'encreasing liver still, / whose growing guttes the grawing gripes and fylthy foules do fyll?"[129] In a sense, though, the Elizabethan translations of Seneca represent a poetic dead end. The future of English dramatic poetry lay elsewhere, in the unrhymed iambic pentameter which was just beginning to be used when the work of Heywood and his colleagues appeared. In a short thirty years this new form had developed into a medium of unprecedented subtlety, and the part that Seneca played in this process may well be his most important legacy as a dramatist. The key figures in the evolution of blank verse—Kyd, Marlowe, and the young Shakespeare—had all read some Seneca in Latin at school, and direct echoes and borrowings of Senecan lines can be discovered throughout their works.[130] Seneca's largest contribution, though, was a less specific one: he provided a model of dramatic verse that was both vigorous and flexible, rich in imagery but still direct and pungent. Marlowe and Shakespeare were greater poets and greater dramatists, but their genius would not have attained the form it did without Seneca as a precedent and example.

After about 1600 Seneca's prestige as a dramatist began to decline. He is still a significant influence on the French classical tragedy of the seventeenth century, but even there he counts for less than the Greek tragedians, whose standing continued to rise at Seneca's expense in subsequent centuries, as knowledge and appreciation of Greek culture increased. The most severe blow to Seneca's reputation came from nineteenth-century Romanticism, by whose standards everything about his work appeared repellently artificial. The present century has been more receptive: Seneca's departures from naturalism and his dark, even nihilistic view of life no longer disqualify him from being taken seriously as an artist.[131] Senecan drama may never again exert a profound and widespread influence, as it did during the Renaissance, but for the moment at least it has found readers for whom its themes and modes of expression are, if anything, disconcertingly familiar.

[129] Heywood was translating a text different from the one printed in modern editions, with the variant *semper accrescens iecur* for *qui specu vasto patens* in line 9.

[130] For examples see notes on 168, 246, 250–54, 259, 269–70.

[131] Precisely these aspects of Senecan drama were in fact highlighted in the most important production of a Senecan play in recent years, Peter Brook's *Oedipus* of 1967 (in an English version by Ted Hughes).

MANUSCRIPTS AND EDITIONS[132]

More than 400 manuscript copies of Seneca's tragedies survive, the vast majority dating from the 14th and 15th centuries and most of these still not thoroughly studied.[133] This enormous body of testimony seems to derive ultimately from two copies, or possibly two editions, of Seneca's plays produced in late Antiquity (i.e., the 4th or 5th centuries A.D.).[134] One of these ancient texts is the source of the earliest surviving manuscript, written in northern Italy toward the end of the eleventh century and since the 1490s in the Laurentian Library in Florence (Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, plut. lat. 37.13). This manuscript was first systematically used in the edition of J. F. Gronovius (Leiden, 1661), who dubbed it the "codex Etruscus" (i.e., Florentine); today it is still known as the "Etruscus" or E. E is the only representative of its branch of tradition with independent authority; it is in turn the ancestor of a group of 14th-century Italian manuscripts (FMN in the diagram below), whose testimony is only helpful in places where E itself has been damaged or corrected. Nearly all other manuscripts descend from a second ancient text, which differed from the E-branch in the order and some of the titles of the plays (above, p. 8).[135] Manuscripts based on this second ancient copy begin to appear in northern France at the end of the twelfth century, in England soon thereafter, and in Italy by the end of the thirteenth century. This strain of transmission (called "A" by modern scholars) became the dominant form of the text in the 14th and 15th centuries, although many A manuscripts were more or less carefully compared with texts related to E, producing a large group of hybrid (or "contaminated") manuscripts. In most places the testimony of A can be recovered from four of its best representatives: on the one hand, Paris Bibliothèque nationale lat. 8260 (13th century, called P) and Bibl. nat. lat. 8031 (15th century, called T), which belong to a rare but superior subgroup (known as δ), and on the other, Cambridge Corpus Christi College 406 (13th century, called C) and El Escorial T.III.11 (late 13th century, called S), the purest surviving specimens of a second A subgroup (β), to which nearly all the later medieval copies belong.

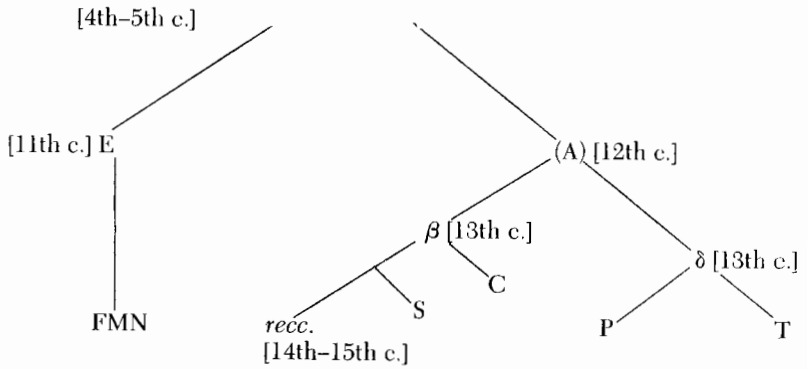
The relationships of the manuscripts named above can be shown on the following simplified *stemma*:

[132] Fuller accounts in my edition of *Agamemnon*, 23–94, also (with corrections) in L. D. Reynolds, ed., *Texts and Transmission* (Oxford, 1983), 378–81; Fantham, 116–24; Zwierlein, *Prolegomena*.

[133] A handlist by A. P. MacGregor is forthcoming in *ANRW*.

[134] Fragments of a third ancient copy are extant in Milan Bibl. Ambrosiana G 82 sup. (= S.P. 9.13–20), written probably in Italy in the 5th century. The Ambrosian fragments do not include any lines from *Thyestes*.

[135] The immediate ancestor of the A family also differed from E in containing the *Octavia*, but this might have been a relatively late insertion.



These affiliations (which are fairly stable) furnish an editor with some guidance in constructing a text of the tragedies. When, for example, E PT agree against CS or—as happens much less often—E CS agree against PT, the minority reading is probably an error of β or δ respectively, and may therefore be disregarded. On the other hand, any reading attested either in E or in PTCS (= A) is at least potentially ancient, and must therefore be assessed on its intrinsic merits, i.e., conformity with Senecan style and suitability to the context. In practice E is the more reliable branch; it is in particular much less prone than A to interpolation, i.e., deliberate rewriting of obscure or difficult passages.[136] In hundreds of places, however, A preserves what look like original readings that have been corrupted in E, so E's overall superiority may only be invoked to settle a choice between readings of roughly equal merit. When E and A agree, they do not necessarily yield the reading of Seneca's original text, but only that of the ancient copies from which they derive; editors must still judge whether this consensus reflects the original or whether an emendation is required.[137] This is an issue on which scholars are rarely in full agreement, which explains why no single edition of a classical text is likely to be accepted as definitive.

The editions of Seneca's tragedies in common use today are those of Friedrich Leo (Berlin, 1878; the basis of the Loeb text of F. J. Miller, Cambridge, Mass., 1917), the Teubner text of Rudolf Peiper and Gustav Richter (Leipzig, 1902), and the most recent critical text, by Gian Carlo Giardina (Bologna, 1966). None of these editions reports the readings of T, and only Giardina reports the testimony of PCS. For these and other reasons a new critical text is very much needed; fortunately, the long-awaited Oxford Classical Texts edition by Otto Zwierlein should soon be available.

[136] For examples of interpolation in A see notes on 180–82, 469, appendix of variants at lines 9, 439, 526.

[137] The places where late manuscripts offer readings superior to the consensus of EA (cf., e.g., *Thy.* 355, 487, 624, 652, 731, 1070) are probably instances of successful conjecture rather than evidence for independent survival of ancient readings.

For this edition I have constructed a new text on the basis of Giardina's reports of E FCS, adding the readings of T from my own collation of a microfilm copy. [Note: T has been heavily and skillfully corrected by a second hand. The corrections are sometimes difficult to make out on microfilm; my reports are consequently at times tentative (and should in all cases be checked against Zwierlein's OCT).]

Orthography

In general I have followed the principles used in my text of *Agamemnon* (set out on pp. 363–68 of the edition), aiming for consistency on each single point (e.g., *natus* everywhere, although the Mss vary between *natus* and *gnatus*). In one respect, however, I have adopted a different approach. It seems clear that in formal speech and poetry of the first century A.D. both the *-is* and *-es* forms of the accusative plural of i-stem third declension nouns and adjectives were in normal use, and that the choice of one form rather than another was determined by considerations of euphony (cf. the remarks of the scholar Valerius Probus quoted by Aulus Gellius 13.21). I have therefore admitted accusative plurals in *-is* where they have manuscript attestation and where they seem to harmonize with their surroundings (cf., e.g., 44 *omnis* and 107 *fontis*); whether I have come closer to Seneca's own practice by doing so is, of course, open to question.

C. *THYESTES*

THE MYTH

Seneca took it for granted that his audience would be thoroughly familiar with the mythic plots of his plays; he therefore reduced expository passages to a minimum and alluded freely to events before and after the action of the plays themselves. The following factual outline may be useful in giving modern readers some of this sense of prior familiarity.[138] (Numbers in parentheses denote references in the text of the play.)

Tantalus, king of Sipylus in Phrygia and a son of Zeus, had two children, Pelops and Niobe, by his wife Dione, a daughter of Atlas. He was granted the privilege of joining the gods at their feasts, but he incurred their enmity by abusing this honor, either by stealing the divine ambrosia and nectar to share with mortals, by revealing the gods' secrets (91–93), or by serving them the flesh of Pelops (144–49). He was condemned to eternal punishment in the underworld, either with a rock

[138] The main mythographical sources are "Apollodorus" *Epitome* 2.1–14 (with Frazer's extensive notes) and "Hyginus" *fab.* 82–88. Other useful discussions in A. C. Pearson's *Fragments of Sophocles* s. vv. *Atreus* and *Thyestes*; F. Bömer's commentary on Ovid *Met.* 6.173.

perpetually suspended above him (cf. 153) or by being placed in a stream with fruit-trees over his head and having the water and fruit constantly elude his efforts to reach them (149–75).

Pelops as a young man came as a suitor to Hippodamia, the daughter of Oenomaus, ruler of Pisa in Elis. Having been warned by an oracle that he would be killed by a son-in-law, Oenomaus had decreed that any suitor wishing to marry Hippodamia must first defeat him in a chariot-race. (Oenomaus' horses were a gift from Ares and therefore invincible.) Pelops arranged for Myrtilus, Oenomaus' charioteer, to sabotage the king's chariot, promising in return to share his own kingdom with him (139–43, 659–61).[139] Oenomaus was killed in the race, and Pelops won Hippodamia. On the homeward journey he disposed of Myrtilus by drowning him in what then became known as the Myrtoan Sea, then returned to Elis as Oenomaus' successor, enlarging his kingdom to include much of southern Greece and calling it the Peloponnese after himself.

Pelops had many children, among them Atreus and Thyestes. Atreus married Aerope and had two sons, Agamemnon and Menelaus. Aerope fell in love with Thyestes and committed adultery with him (46–47, 239, 1103), and when the two brothers competed for the throne of Mycenae, Aerope assisted her lover Thyestes. Victory in the contest turned on the possession of a miraculous ram with golden fleece; this was owned by Atreus but was stolen by Aerope and given to Thyestes, who thus obtained control of Mycenae and banished Atreus (32–36, 42–43, 225–37).[140] After a time the situation was reversed: Atreus regained power and drove Thyestes into exile (37–38).[141] Determined to avenge the wrongs done to him by Thyestes, Atreus lured him and his sons[142] back to Mycenae by feigning a desire to be reconciled; he then killed the children and served their flesh to their unwitting father.

Thyestes fled Mycenae and inquired of Apollo's oracle how he might take revenge on Atreus. He was told that he could only produce an avenger by mating with his own daughter (41–42, 46–47). The prophecy was fulfilled either at Sicyon (Hyg. 88.3) or at the court of Thesprotus in

[139] So "Hyginus" (84.4); "Apollodorus" attributes Myrtilus' treachery to his passion for Hippodamia (who was in turn infatuated with Pelops).

[140] The original significance of the ram is obscure, cf. Frazer on "Apollodorus" *Epit.* 2.11. Seneca's description in *Thy.* 225–31 suggests that its possession was a guarantee of sovereignty for a Pelopid; could *Pelopis* (225) imply that it had once belonged to Pelops?

[141] According to "Apollodorus" (*Epit.* 2.12), Zeus assisted Atreus in regaining power by causing the sun to set in the East at his bidding. The more familiar significance of the sun's reversal is at least as old as Sophocles, cf. *Anth. Pal.* 9.98.2.

[142] The number and names of the children vary: "Apollodorus" gives three names (Aglaus, Callileon, and Orchomenus), "Hyginus" only two, Tantalus and Plisthenes. Seneca has these plus an unnamed *puer*, cf. 731–43. Neither mythographical source need reflect an early tradition; cf. Fraenkel on Aesch. *Ag.* 1605, n. 2.

Epirus, where Thyestes had found refuge; he encountered his daughter Pelopia and raped her, probably without realizing her identity. The child that Pelopia conceived was exposed at birth, found and reared by herdsmen, and given the name Aegisthus; he eventually discovered his parentage and killed Atreus, in some versions also restoring the kingdom of Mycenae to Thyestes. Later he joined with Clytaemestra in killing Atreus' son Agamemnon on his return from the Trojan War (43–46).

DRAMATIC VERSIONS BEFORE SENECA

The house of Tantalus provided Greek dramatists with one of their favorite themes, and no part of the saga was as often treated as the strife between Atreus and Thyestes. Sophocles wrote at least two plays on the subject, an *Atreus* and the play usually called *Thyestes in Sicyon*; Euripides wrote a *Thyestes*, a *Plisthenes* (dealing with Thyestes' efforts to avenge the loss of his children), and a third play, *The Cretan Women*, in which both Thyestes and Aerope appeared; plays with the title *Thyestes* or *Aerope* are recorded for several other Greek tragedians (Agathon, Chaeremon, Carcinus, Cleophon, Diogenes, Apollodorus of Tarsus). The legend was equally popular among Roman dramatists before Seneca: Ennius wrote a *Thyestes* and Accius an *Atreus* (both well known to Cicero, who quotes from each several times), and Accius may have handled a later phase of the story in his *Pelopidae*; from the Augustan period we know of Varius' *Thyestes* and a play with the same title by Gracchus (named together by Ovid in *Pont.* 4.16.31); the *Atreus* of Mamercus Aemilius Scaurus belongs to the reign of Tiberius (Dio 58.24.3–4 claims that it grievously offended the emperor); finally there was an *Atreus* by Pomponius Secundus, quite possibly written within a few years of Seneca's play.

Unfortunately, not one of this large corpus of pre-Senecan plays survives in more than fragments.[143] In several cases what remains can be plausibly related to more than one phase of the Tantalid saga, and only for Accius' *Atreus* does the evidence reveal even the broad outlines of the treatment. Sophocles' *Atreus*, which is generally agreed to have covered much the same ground as Seneca's play, has disappeared virtually without trace, unless its influence is to be seen in Accius' handling. Euripides' *Thyestes* is almost as intangible: the fragments do not show whether the play dealt with Atreus' revenge and the banquet or with a later episode; a line in Aristophanes' *Acharnians* (433) suggests that Thyestes appeared on stage in rags, but this detail would fit equally well with his return from exile as in Seneca (cf. 524–26) or with his arrival,

[143] The basic discussion is still A. Lesky, "Die griechischen Pelopidendramen und Senecas Thyestes," *Wiener Studien* 43 (1922/3), 172–98 (though Lesky's attempt to identify Euripides as Seneca's main source presses the evidence too far).

disgraced and polluted, at the court of Thesprotus. A similar ambiguity surrounds the plot of Ennius' *Thyestes* (perhaps an adaptation of Euripides' play); thanks to Cicero, however, we can at least see that Thyestes' role contained passages of considerable power, among them an urgent appeal to a chorus of "strangers" (*hospites*) not to come near him in his polluted state (349–51 V^2 = 293–95 J) and an impassioned denunciation of Atreus that imagined for him a horrible death and mutilation at sea (362–65 V^2 = 296–99 J).

The most frustrating of these losses is Varius' *Thyestes*, by all accounts an outstandingly good play and potentially the strongest single influence on Seneca's treatment.[144] Only one line is securely attributed to it, the trimeter *iam fero infandissima, iam facere cogor*, spoken by Atreus according to Quintilian (3.8.45). It is usually assigned to a scene corresponding to Seneca's second act (176–335), in which Atreus justified his planned revenge on Thyestes (see specifically Sen. *Thy.* 201–202 and note *ad loc.*).[145] This attribution, though, rests on the premise that the banquet was the *dénouement* of Varius' play, as it is in Seneca (and Accius), and this assumption, though plausible, cannot be proven true; indeed, Eckard Lefèvre has recently offered an alternative reconstruction that sets the play after the *cena*, ending with Atreus' death at the hands of Aegisthus.[146] Even if Lefèvre's view is not accepted,[147] there is no secure basis for regarding Varius as the model for any particular aspect of Seneca's play.[148]

Only in the case of Accius' *Atreus* does enough survive to let us go beyond generalities, enough in fact to allow most of its scenes to be sketched out with some confidence; what emerges is a play which overlaps with Seneca's to a remarkable extent, both in general outline and in some specific details.[149] It began with an expository prologue (perhaps spoken by a god or some other figure not involved in the action) which

[144] The play enjoyed lasting renown as a classic of Roman drama, cf. Quint. 10.1.98, Tac. *Dial.* 12.6.

[145] The proud entrance-lines of an Atreus quoted by Seneca at *Epist.* 80.7 have also been plausibly referred to this play: *en impero Argis; regna mihi liquit Pelops, / qua ponto ab Helles atque ab Ionio mari / urgetur Isthmos.* (More speculatively, cf. Sen. *Contr.* 1.1.21 = *inc. inc. fab.* 212 R^2.)

[146] *Der Thyestes des Lucius Varius Rufus: Zehn Überlegungen zu seiner Rekonstruktion* (Akademie der Wissenschaften und der Literatur, Mainz; Abhandlungen der Geistes- und Sozialwissenschaftlichen Klasse, 1976.9).

[147] See the comments of H. D. Jocelyn, *Gnomon* 50 (1978), 778–80; R. J. Tarrant, *CR* n.s. 29 (1979), 149–50.

[148] One might suggest that the prominence of Aerope as a tragic character in Ovid *Tr.* 2.391–92 and Quintilian 11.3.73 implies a substantial role for her in Varius' play (so Wilamowitz, quoted by Lefèvre, 9–10).

[149] On the structure (particularly the conclusion) of Accius' *Atreus* see now O. Zwierlein, *Hermes* 111 (1983), 121–25.

included a detailed genealogy of Atreus (Serv. Auct. on Verg. *Aen.* 8.130) and an account of Pelops' winning of Hippodamia (197 R^2); it probably went on to narrate Thyestes' adultery with Aerope, the theft of the golden ram, Atreus' expulsion and return to power, and Thyestes' present exile. There followed, as in Seneca, a scene in which Atreus brooded over his grievances against Thyestes and worked out his plan of revenge (198–213 R^2), described in general terms by Cicero: *ille funestas epulas frati comparans nonne versat huc et illuc cogitatione rationem?* (*N.D.* 3.68). In all likelihood an underling served as a foil to Atreus, and it was probably an objection from this character (along the lines of Sen. *Thy.* 204–205 *fama te populi nihil / adversa terret?*) that provoked from Atreus the most famous line in all of Accius, the splendidly tyrannical *oderint, dum metuant* (quoted three times each by Cicero and Seneca, and "capped" by Seneca's Atreus in *Thy.* 206–207 *facta domini cogitur populus sui / tam ferre quam laudare*). Atreus then left the stage and Thyestes arrived with his children, to whom he offered sage advice on the burdens of power (215–16 R^2) and the snares that lie in wait for the upright (214 R^2). These remarks suggest that Thyestes was suspicious of Atreus' good will; perhaps, again as in Seneca, his sons overcame his misgivings.[150] No trace survives of the first encounter between the brothers, and we next pick up the thread with the Messenger relating Atreus' preparation of the children's flesh: *concoquit / partem vapore flammae, veribus in foco / lacerta tribuit* (220–22 R^2, cf. Sen. *Thy.* 765–67, 770).[151] The banquet may well have been presented on stage; one fragment (217–18 R^2) has Atreus ordering that no one should sit with Thyestes or share his food, and another, admittedly uncertain in attribution, may preserve part of the moment of recognition, with Thyestes suspecting that he has eaten his children and Atreus wryly answering, "I wouldn't think of lessening your worries by denying it" (*numquam istam imminuam curam infitiando tibi*, 233 R^2).[152] The banquet touched off the traditional disturbance in the heavens, one of the play's most noted incidents (schol. Ovid *Ibis* 427) and the subject of its only surviving lyrics, three lines of excited anapests (223–25 R^2) usually given to the Chorus but conceivably belonging to Thyestes: *sed quid tonitru turbida torvo / concussa repente aequora caeli / sensimus sonere?* (cf. Sen. *Thy.* 992–95). The play ended with Thyestes

[150] This might be the place for fr. 234bisR^2, specifically attributed to the *Atreus* by a scholiast on Verg. G. 1.1: *probae etsi in segetem* [= *terram*] *sunt deteriorem datae / fruges, tamen ipsae suapte natura enitent.* A comforting argument advanced by one of Thyestes' sons?

[151] Perhaps also fr. 219 R^2 *epularum fictor, scelerum fratris delitor* (though the text is uncertain).

[152] So R. G. M. Nisbet on Cic. *Pis.* 82; this placement, however, requires emending the attribution in Asconius, who gives the line to Thyestes.

aghast at Atreus' deception and helplessly bewailing his own disgrace (227, 231–32 R^2), while Atreus reminded him of his earlier crimes (228 R^2).[153]

From this brief survey it appears that the disposition of scenes and some of the elements of character-depiction in Seneca's *Thyestes* follow an outline used at least by Accius (if not by Varius as well), and possibly worked out as early as Sophocles or Euripides. This adherence to tradition may help to explain why the *Thyestes* fits more comfortably within the conventions of the ancient stage than most Senecan tragedies, but it does not lessen the originality of the play or its status as an authentically Senecan creation.

SENECA'S *THYESTES*[154]

The *Thyestes* is an extraordinarily cohesive play, in which all the elements of drama—plot, character, setting, language—work together to produce an impact of shattering power. The following paragraphs comment briefly on some of the means by which Seneca achieves this remarkable integration.

The play's title denotes its most complex character, and also the figure whose downfall furnishes the leading action, but it is Atreus and Thyestes, and not Thyestes alone, who constitute its true center of interest. Although the brothers meet on stage in only two scenes, they are linked throughout the play, in the Messenger's narrative (682–788), the Fury's foreshadowing (54–62), and above all in each other's thoughts (176–335, 412–16, 473–86, 491–507, 885–919). As befits brothers, Atreus and Thyestes are both alike and yet different. They share a longing for power and a lack of moral inhibition that mark them as true descendants

[153] Two fragments assigned to the *Atreus* by Ribbeck and others seem not to belong: (1) 233 R^2 *ecquis hoc animadvortet? vincite!*, cited by Cicero *De or.* 3.217 as an example of *iracundia*, but not necessarily from the *Atreus* (so also Zwierlein, *op. cit.*, 122–23); (2) 229–30 R^2 *ipsus hortatur me frater ut meos malis miser / manderem natos*, which seems to be spoken by Thyestes recounting his deception to others (perhaps in Accius' *Pelopidae*?). On the other hand, three unplaced lines of Accius (657–59 R^2) in high emotive style, lamenting the Tantalid drive to self-destruction, might form part of Thyestes' shocked reaction in the final scene: *quisnam Tantalidarum internecioni modus / paretur? aut quaenam umquam ob mortem Myrtili / poenis luendis dabitur satias supplici?*

[154] For other general treatments of the play cf. C. J. Herington, *CHLL* 524–29; N. T. Pratt, *Seneca's Drama* (Chapel Hill, 1983), 103–107; C. P. Segal, *Antike und Abendland* 29 (1983), 183–86; and the articles by Boyle, Calder, Gigon, Hine, Knoche, Poe, and Steidle listed in the Bibliography. [To these may now be added E. Lefèvre, "Die philosophische Bedeutung der Seneca-Tragödie am Beispiel des 'Thyestes'," *ANRW* II.32.1 (due to appear in 1985), which offers an acute analysis of the character of Thyestes and a generous sampling of earlier work on the play.] On imagery cf. N. T. Pratt, "Major Systems of Figurative Language in Senecan Melodrama," *TAPA* 94 (1963), 199–234.

of Tantalus and Pelops (cf. on 2 *avido . . . ore*, 53, 133–37, 339–42, 1011–12). But while both are drawn to power, its attractions are different for each. Thyestes associates power with the rewards and comforts of high status (cf. 455–67), which he claims to despise but which he cannot in the end resist (cf., e.g., 470, 542–43, 920–37). For Atreus, on the other hand, the trappings of rule are of no interest whatever; to him power means only one thing, the ability to impose one's will on others, preferably against their bitter opposition (205–18). This portrayal of the brothers gives new meaning to the traditional story of Atreus' revenge. That Thyestes participates actively in his own undoing becomes a vindication of Atreus' control over him (277–78, 285–86),[155] while the form of Atreus' vengeance makes Thyestes' fatal weakness, his physical appetites, a fitting instrument of his destruction.

With superb economy, Seneca suggests the essential features of Atreus and Thyestes in their opening lines. Here is Atreus: *ignave, iners, enervis, et (quod maximum / probrum tyranno rebus in summis reor) / inulte* (176–78); restless and dissatisfied, but clear in his aims, sharply aware of his position as a *tyrannus*, and determined to avenge any slight to his control. Now Thyestes: *optata patriae tecta et Argolicas opes / miserisque summum ac maximum exulibus bonum, / tractum soli natalis et patrios deos / (si sunt tamen di) cerno* (404–407); outwardly joyful, but already showing signs of doubt (*si sunt tamen di*) and unwittingly confessing the attraction to wealth that will be his ruin (*optata tecta et . . . opes*; see note *ad loc.*). In wording as well, these two entrance lines form a scrupulously contrasted pair. Each brother places a qualifying phrase with *maximus* after his opening words (*quod . . . reor, miserisque . . . bonum*), a shared mannerism that sets off the more significant differences. Atreus' self-indictment mounts steadily in force, with sound reinforcing sense, from *ignave* to *iners* to *enervis*; then, after tension has been heightened by the delaying phrase *quod . . . reor*, the reason for his scorn finally becomes clear in the pointed and unexpected *inulte*. Here, as throughout the play, Atreus' strength of will and singleminded pursuit of his goals are reflected in his command of language; he is a virtuoso rhetorician, whose verbal powers are an expression—in a sense, the most complete expression—of his personality.[156] Thyestes' language is equally indicative; his phrases seem to strive toward a climax that never arrives, while sounding ironic undertones of which he remains unaware (404, also 409–10 *nobilis / palmam paterno . . . curru tuli*). From his first words the audience is led to see

[155] For the same reason Thyestes' lack of awareness (and so of resistance) deprives Atreus of his keenest pleasure, cf. 1054–68.

[156] The language of Atreus can be seen as a masterful embodiment, in Senecan terms, of Cicero's prescription for the speech of anger: *aliud . . . vocis genus iracundia sibi sumat, acutum, incitatum, crebro incidens* (*De or.* 3.216).

Thyestes' lack of self-knowledge, his internal divisions, and his disastrous weakness of will. This distinction in the brothers' use of language forms an essential part of Seneca's character-portrayal. Atreus is consistently the master of language, Thyestes its victim; words are for one a weapon, for the other a trap.

The minor figures of the drama all participate to some degree in the central conflict. Tantalus and the Fury do so most obviously, since their struggle parallels and symbolically anticipates Atreus' victory over Thyestes. In their various ways the attendant who fails to restrain Atreus' cruelty and in the end pledges wholehearted support and the messenger who overcomes his horror at speaking and comes finally to exult in the atrocity he relates each manifest the eventual triumph of evil over all resistance. The Chorus's relation to the action is more complex, but its lyrics follow a basically similar line of development. The first ode expresses a belief in divine justice (149–51) and a hope for release from impious rulers (132–37). In the middle odes, despite the appearance of concord between Atreus and Thyestes, the Chorus turns inward in search of true power (*regnum*), but the idyllic vision of untroubled withdrawal (393–400) is soon overshadowed by thoughts of ceaseless change and an unknowable future (596–622). The final ode confronts the prospect of universal disaster, salvaging a voluntary death from the ruins of a collapsing world (875–84). The Chorus is no more able than the other characters to halt the progress of *ira* or to escape its consequences, but the breadth of its perspective and the dignity of its ultimate response give the play its only moments of moral sanity.[157]

Thyestes is unusual among Seneca's plays for the prominence it gives to the physical setting. From the play's first speech, when Tantalus declares that Tartarus will never lack for criminals "while the house of Pelops stands" (22), the *domus* is a constant dramatic presence, its impious potency rendered visible by Tantalus' polluting touch (101–103, cf. also 53; later 190–91, 404, 625, 641–82, 901–902). In the final scene the *domus* is even, as it were, brought on stage, as Thyestes is seen within it reclining at his dreadful banquet (902–903, 908–969). The stage-picture here brilliantly reflects the significance of the action, since the *domus* (which is also the *arx*, cf. 641) represents the royal status that both brothers long for (*cupidi arcium* 342). In his opening speech Atreus prays "that this royal palace of great Pelops collapse on me, as long as it falls as well on my brother" (190–91). His wish is in a sense fulfilled, since the power symbolized by the *domus* lures Thyestes to his doom and drives Atreus himself into madness.

[157] The Chorus's sentiments take on added weight because of the remarkably personal language in which they are uttered: each ode except the first ends with a striking shift to the first person, cf. 393–400, 621–22, 875–84 (and notes *ad locc.*).

The most comprehensive source of the play's coherence is its imagery, a thickly interwoven network of motifs that encompasses all the figures and themes of the drama. Some images point up distinctions between characters, as when Atreus and Thyestes are each described as "dripping" (*madidus*), one with gore (734) and the other with hair-oil (780). Animal-imagery is applied with similar precision: the Tantalids generally are called "bestial" (*ferus*, cf. 136, 150), but Atreus is consistently depicted as a predator (497–503, 707–11, 732–36), Thyestes as a hunted victim (286–87, 491, see on 413–14).[158] The connections between Tantalus and his descendants also provide the basis for the profusion of words denoting "fullness" and "emptiness" in the prologue and opening chorus (cf. note on 22 *complebo*), which foreshadows the brothers' pursuit of "fullness" in differing senses (cf. 253–54 *impleri iuvat / maiore monstro*, 890–91 *implebo patrem / funere suorum*), a satiety that provokes a horrified "emptiness" in the surrounding world (892 *caelum vacat*). More specific links between Tantalus and Thyestes account for several appearances of the motif of "flight" or "escape": Tantalus longs to escape the Fury's compulsion (83), but is finally made to "follow" (100), just as Thyestes, though he wishes to flee back into exile (412, 428), in the end uneasily "follows" his sons (489). In the final scene Thyestes, having failed to seize his earlier opportunity, seems haunted by thoughts of flight, escape, and freedom (cf. 922–23, 1003, 1042, 1044), while in reality he comes to resemble Tantalus more closely, a figure of painful fixity from whom things run (Tantalus 2, 69, 154, 172; Thyestes 986, 1021, 1070, especially 1016–17).

Other images are not linked to individual characters but cluster around the play's central themes. Several of them operate on both the literal and metaphorical level, thereby underscoring the importance of these themes while at the same time glossing their significance. The idea of violent fragmentation, for example, takes in Atreus' dismemberment of his victims (cf. 760 *divisum secat*, 1039 *rupta fractis cruribus vestigia*), the figurative rupturing of moral ties that produced it (179 *fas omne ruptum*), and the fracture of the natural order that it in turn calls forth (cf. 777 *ruptum . . . diem*).[159] Similarly the notion of an oppressive weight applies both to Thyestes in his abominable fullness (781 *gravis . . . vino*, 910 *vino gravatum . . . caput*, 1000 *onus*, 1050–51 *natos premo / premorque natis*) and also to the outer world, weighed down by the resulting darkness (see on 787 *gravis*). The concept of "extinction" shows the connection of the moral and physical realms at its clearest, since the realization of the Fury's wish

[158] The motif of "uncertainty" or "hesitation" is also applied to both brothers, but in different situations, cf. 422, 490 versus 709–14, 724–25.

[159] In counterpoint to this image is that of an equally unnatural linking, as for example in 466–67 *somno dies / Bacchoque nox iungenda*, 979 *totum . . . turba iam sua implebo patrem*; see on 433 *componit artus*.

ius . . . omne pereat (48) is the annihilation of cosmic order (813 *solitae mundi periere vices*). The most complex single pattern of imagery surrounds the play's crucial action: the victory of evil over all attempts to resist or evade it. On the level of verbal imagery this theme is reflected in the many references to unwillingness (cf., e.g., 420 *moveo nolentem gradum*, 565 *invitus . . . ensis*, 770 [*ignis*] *invitus ardet*, 896 *die nolente*, 965 *nolo infelix*, 985–86 *nolunt manus / parere*), ordering or commanding (cf. 165 [*fames*] *iubet*, 769 *iussus pati moram*, 943–44 *quid flere iubes . . . dolor?*), and enduring (cf. 158 *nec patiens morae*, 198, 767, 1000 *impatiens onus*; see on 470, 931). Here too Tantalus and Thyestes show a close resemblance; each has to be prodded to act against his judgment, and this parallel finds its verbal expression in the imperative *perge* addressed to each (23, 490); Atreus, on the other hand, is the instigator of action rather than its object, and so he applies this sort of pressure to himself (890 *pergam*, 892 *perge*). Atreus in fact provides the most pregnant statement of this theme, when he announces his aim to make his subjects "will what they would not" (*quod nolunt velint* 212). Only the gods escape Atreus' efforts at compulsion (893–95), but they maintain their freedom by a withdrawal so complete as to seem tantamount to nonexistence.[160]

A still more pervasive image runs through the play, of which several of the motifs mentioned so far can be seen as particular aspects. From the first words of the prologue, where Tantalus finds himself forcibly removed from his usual place of torment (*quis . . . sede ab infausta extrahit* 1), Seneca's language repeatedly depicts a disjointed world, in which things do not remain in their normal position[161] and in which customary boundaries fail to hold good. At the level of plot this confusion of realms is represented by the unnatural outbreak of night (777, cf. also 677–79 and perhaps 466–67) and also by the intrusion of the lower world into the world of the living (1–122, 668–78, cf. 804–12). (It could be added that Thyestes' action is itself a perverse mingling, both of what is and what is not proper nourishment, cf. 917 *mixtum suorum sanguinem*, and also of the living and the dead, cf. 1041–47, 1090–92.) Simile and allusion extend the theme further, breaking down the distinction between "civilized" and "barbarous" (627–32, 1047–50) and even between human and animal (707–12, 732–37). All these violations of order emanate from a single source, the *ira* of Atreus. *Tantum potest quantum odit*, says Thyestes with greater truth than he realizes (483): "his power is as great as his hatred." That hatred is itself

[160] This theme too operates on a literal and a figurative level, so that, for example, Thyestes' statement "the gods have fled" (*fugere superi*, 1021) describes both the absence of celestial light and also the disappearance of divinely sanctioned norms of morality. (For a comparable double sense see on *aras . . . extinguens* 742.)

[161] This may be the reason for the remarkable prominence of words for "wandering" (*errare, vagare, vagus*); see, for example, on 282, 631, 1068–69. On "boundary violation" in Senecan tragedy see now Segal, *op. cit.* (p. 43, n. 154).

without limit (26, 255–56, 1053–54), and so it has the strength to overturn all boundaries, throwing the very cosmos into anarchic confusion.

The world of the *Thyestes* is bizarre and nightmarish, but it is not the product of mere fantasy. In its externals it is, in fact, curiously similar to Seneca's own, a world of *Lares, Penates*, and *Quirites* (264, 775, 396), of rooftop gardens and heated bathing-pools (464–66), where Parthians and Alans threaten the margins of empire (382–84, 603, 629–30) and rulers chosen by Jupiter bestow diadems on obedient client-kings (599). In this patently Roman context Seneca's Atreus—a vicious and demented tyrant whose megalomania extends to self-deification[162]—cannot have failed to strike audiences as disturbingly familiar. The obvious links are with "Caligula," whom Seneca had depicted in similar terms in the *De ira*[163] and who could safely be held up to Nero as an *exemplum* of all that was abhorrent in a ruler. The play might carry other, more subversive contemporary allusions; by their nature, though, any hostile references to Nero would need to be so well concealed as to be, at this distance, beyond certain discovery.[164] What does seem clear is that Seneca's portrait of Atreus draws some of its unique conviction from Seneca's first-hand observation of absolute power.

In the end, though, the play derives its power from an ability to reflect and clarify the enduring facts of human experience. Its vision of life is even by tragic standards painfully bleak. It portrays a world where belief in a benign providence seems a delusion and ambition merely another form of folly, where the highest aspirations possible are a life of peaceful obscurity or, failing that, a freely chosen death, and where even this modest degree of control is rarely attained. At the heart of the play, in the portraits of Atreus and Thyestes, lies an anguished sense of the fragility of reason and order, a dreadful awareness of what human beings can be led to do and to suffer by the irrational forces within them. These concerns do not represent the sum of life, but they are real, and they have not lost their meaning in the second half of the twentieth century. The vision of the *Thyestes* may even seem appallingly prophetic in an age when, as never before in history, paranoiac suspicion and the unbounded drive for power can literally consume the world.

[162] Cf. 712–13, 885, 911; for Atreus' madness cf. 547 *nec potens mentis*, 682 *furens*.

[163] Above, p. 4.

[164] One possible candidate: the reference to poisoning in 453 *venenum in auro bibitur*, although a commonplace (and therefore unsuspicious), could carry an additional resonance if, as seems plausible on other grounds (above, p. 13), the play was written after the death of Britannicus in 55. The story of Atreus and Thyestes had already been made the basis for "invective against palace and dynasty" and "maxims of subversive statecraft" (R. Syme, *Tacitus* [Oxford, 1958], 362) and would serve a similar purpose for Curiatius Maternus under Vespasian, cf. Tac. *Dial.* 3.3.

THYESTES

PERSONAE

TANTALI UMBRA
FURIA
ATREUS
SATELLES
THYESTES
TANTALUS filius eius
PLISTHENES tacitus
NUNTIUS
CHORUS ARGIVORUM

The conventional act divisions are not part of the text as transmitted by the manuscripts; they are therefore printed within brackets.

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