

## PREFACE

Although the *Thyestes* is widely acknowledged to be one of Seneca's most powerful tragedies, there has until now been no modern commentary on the play in any language. My principal aim has thus been to make this extraordinary work more widely accessible and so contribute to a greater appreciation of its quality. The *Thyestes* seems to me an even better and richer play now than it did when I embarked on this commentary; I hope that the pleasure I have had in exploring it will be reflected in what I have written, and that my enthusiasm will offer some compensation for my failures of understanding.

Like other volumes in the APA Textbook Series, this book is primarily designed to meet the needs of students; I have specifically tried to keep in mind readers with some experience of Latin poetry but no prior acquaintance with Senecan drama. As a result technical and philological discussion has been held to a minimum, along with references to specialized literature, especially in languages other than English; where possible, lexical and syntactical explanations are keyed to the reference works most readily available to students (e.g., *OLD* rather than *TLL*); notes on textual problems have been placed in brackets for the convenience of readers who may wish to bypass or defer them. At the same time, I hope that my detailed interpretation of the play will be of interest to scholarly readers. I have given particular attention to Seneca's masterful deployment of language, an aspect of his writing still not adequately recognized and one that a line-by-line commentary is uniquely able to display.

While working on this book I have received much help of various kinds, which it is now my pleasant duty to acknowledge. Successive chairmen of the APA's Committee on Publications and of its Editorial Board for Textbooks have shown remarkable forbearance toward an often exasperating author; I owe special thanks to Gilbert Lawall for his skill in finally extracting a manuscript from me and for his painstaking care in preparing it for the printer. Elaine Fantham and John Fitch provided detailed and helpful comments on the entire book, and allowed me early access to the products of their own Senecan researches. As in the past, Otto Zwierlein has given me the benefit of his opinion on problems of text; he has also most generously shown me the relevant sections of his forthcoming OCT edition of the tragedies. Colleagues and students both in Toronto and at Harvard have listened patiently to my inchoate ideas, supplied me with useful information, and saved me from at least

some of my blunders; I am particularly grateful to Lyn Straka for her probing but sympathetic criticisms. A number of my lexical notes have profited from consultation of the files of the *Thesaurus linguae latinae* on microfilm at the Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton; I wish to thank Professor J. F. Gilliam for granting me permission to use this material and Professor C. W. Bowersock for his help in making my stay at the Institute both beneficial and enjoyable. In preparing the final typescript I have had the willing and skillful assistance of Louise Di Giacomo, Lenore Savage, and Juliet Shelmerdine. My wife steadfastly, if misguidedly, refuses to admit that she has done anything to merit mention in this preface, so I must let the dedication suggest the extent of my gratitude to her.

Cambridge, Massachusetts  
April 1985

## ABBREVIATIONS AND SHORT TITLES

AG	Allen and Greenough, <i>A New Latin Grammar</i> [numbers indicate sections]
AJP	<i>American Journal of Philology</i>
ANRW	<i>Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt</i> (Berlin, 1972-)
Bell	A. J. Bell, <i>The Latin Dual and Poetic Diction</i> (Oxford, 1923)
Canter	H. V. Canter, <i>Rhetorical Elements in the Tragedies of Seneca</i> (University of Illinois Studies in Language and Literature 10 [1925])
CHLL	<i>Cambridge History of Latin Literature</i> , ed. E. J. Kenney and W. V. Clausen (Cambridge, 1982)
CP	<i>Classical Philology</i>
Fantham	<i>Seneca's Troades: A Literary Introduction with Text, Translation, and Commentary</i> , by Elaine Fantham (Princeton, 1982)
HSCP	<i>Harvard Studies in Classical Philology</i>
Leo, Obs.	Friedrich Leo, <i>De Senecae tragoediis observationes criticae</i> (Berlin, 1878)
OCD <sup>2</sup>	<i>The Oxford Classical Dictionary</i> (Second edition, Oxford, 1970)
OLD	<i>Oxford Latin Dictionary</i> (Oxford, 1968-82)
Otto	A. Otto, <i>Die Sprichwörter der Römer</i> (Leipzig, 1890)
RE	F. Pauly and G. Wissowa, eds., <i>Real-Encyclopädie der klassischen Altertumswissenschaft</i> (Stuttgart, 1893-)
Roscher	W. H. Roscher, <i>Ausführliches Lexicon der griechischen und römischen Mythologie</i> (Leipzig, 1884-1937)
Schanz-Hosius	M. Schanz and C. Hosius, <i>Geschichte der römischen Literatur</i> , vol. 2 (4th ed., Munich, 1935)
Seidensticker	Bernd Seidensticker, <i>Die Gesprächsverdringung in den Tragödien Senecas</i> (Heidelberg, 1969)
TAPA	<i>Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association</i>
TLL	<i>Thesaurus linguae latinae</i> (Leipzig, 1900-)
Zwierlein, Rezitationsdramen	Otto Zwierlein, <i>Die Rezitationsdramen Senecas</i> (Meisenheim am Glan, 1966)
Prolegomena	<i>Prolegomena zu einer kritischen Ausgabe der Tragödien Senecas</i> (Mainz, 1984)

### Note on citations:

- (1) In general, ancient texts are cited according to the short forms used in standard lexica. For Seneca's short moral treatises, however, I

have preferred abbreviations of their individual titles (*Prov.* = *De Providenti*, 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<sup>1</sup>

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.<sup>2</sup> He was brought to Rome when scarcely out of infancy,<sup>3</sup> 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 Achaëa 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.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Useful digest of information in *OCD*<sup>2</sup> 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.

<sup>2</sup> 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*.

<sup>3</sup> *Cons. Helv.* 19.2.

<sup>4</sup> The work is extant in a severely mutilated form: for five of the ten books of *Controversate* only excerpts are preserved, and only a single set of *Suasoriae* survives from a

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