

The Fall and Rise of Roman Tragedy*

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The history of Roman tragedy rests on a paradox. Not a single play performed publicly at Rome survives intact, while those that have survived—the ten plays of the Senecan corpus—lack all traces of production history. Thus, though we know that Varius' lost *Thyestes* was performed to public acclaim in the early 20s B.C.E. and went on to win literary renown, the when, why, where, and how of Seneca's extant *Thyestes* are beyond recall. Yet the fact remains that tragedy at Rome survived the loss of professional playwrights and the stultifying extravagances of the Republican stage to reemerge under the Principate as a favorite and even a potent genre for Roman aristocrats with a literary turn. How this came about, how tragedy developed between the death of Accius at some point in the 90s B.C.E. and the death of Domitian nearly two centuries later, merits attention both for the story's inherent interest and, in a larger sense, for what it reveals of the forces at work on literature in that seminal period from Republic to empire.

I.

In the late summer of 55 B.C.E., Cicero sweltered through the inaugural ceremonies for Pompey's new theater complex in the Campus Martius. The vast structure itself was in many ways a marvel: Rome's first stone theater, designed to hold perhaps 40,000 spectators, incorporated a temple of Venus Victrix above the cavea, flanked by four ancillary sanctuaries to revered abstractions like Honos and Virtus, while behind the stage building stretched an elaborate portico and formal garden connecting the theater with a new senate-house some 200 meters to the east. Yet neither the awnings nor the innovative water-courses of the new building could relieve the heat of that Roman August or the tedium

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of that inaugural display.¹ Cicero described the program with wry distaste in a famous letter to his friend M. Marius, himself comfortably installed in a villa on the Bay of Naples (*Fam.* 7.1).

The entertainments staged in the new theater on that occasion included mimes, plays, and farces. Performances were in Greek as well as Latin and employed both local and imported talent. Some distinguished veterans of the stage were invited out of retirement for the occasion, and some, says Cicero, unwisely accepted the invitation: old Aesopus, the famous tragic actor of the late Republic, actually lost his voice in mid-sentence, to the embarrassment of all. Related shows in the Circus included races and wild animal displays performed over a five-day period; memory of an elephant hunt there lingered down to Pliny's day. The most notorious spectacle on the program, however, or at least the spectacle that most exasperated Cicero, was the lavish staging of two classic Roman tragedies, Accius' *Clytemnestra* and the *Equus Troianus* of (we think) Naevius.²

quid enim delectationis habent sescenti muli in 'Clytaemestra' aut in 'Equo Troiano' cretarrarum tria milia aut armatura varia peditatus et equitatus in aliqua pugna? quae popularem admirationem habuerent, delectationem tibi nullam attulissent.

What pleasure do six hundred mules in a *Clytemnestra* provide or three thousand mixing-bowls in a *Trojan Horse* or a variegated display of cavalry and infantry equipment in some battle or other? It gave the public a thrill; it would not have brought you any pleasure. (*Fam.* 7.1.2)

The numbers are deliberately overblown: who could count such opulence? The grounds for Cicero's complaint, however, are quite explicit. Tragic performances had taken on the trappings of quite different (and less literary)

¹For the theater structure, see Hanson 43–55, Richardson, and esp. Gleason. Plin. *Nat.* 36.24.115 put its capacity at 40,000, a figure too often doubted by incredulous moderns. Compare the Elizabethan Rose, which we know from secondary evidence held ca. 2,000 spectators, though its diameter of 49' 6" (3 rods) would produce modern estimates of only ca. 400. For the running water of Pompey's theater, see V. Max. 2.6. Theatrical awnings were apparently first introduced at the ludi Apollinares of 60 B.C.E. (Plin. *Nat.* 19.23, cf. Lucr. 4.75–83, a much-argued passage).

²A revival of Livius Andronicus' *Equus Troianus* is less likely: Cic. *Brut.* 71 found his plays not worth a second reading. The letter to Marius is the primary testimony, but cf. Plin. *Nat.* 8.7.20 and D.C. 39.38. Ludi traditionally extended over several days, with different sites for the different kinds of entertainment on offer: Cic. *Leg.* 2.15.38; Liv. 42.10.5.

kinds of public spectacle, in particular the triumph with its elaborate procession, deliberately breath-taking ostentation, and related sideshows.

Pompey himself may well have encouraged the association. Memories of his threefold triumph of 61 over the pirates, Mithridates, and Tigranes were literally built into his new theater by the allegorical figures of fourteen nations set on permanent display along its perimeter (Plin. *Nat.* 36.41; cf. Plu. *Pomp.* 45.2). Even the rows of plane trees that connected the theater building with the new Curia beyond it might have suggested a military formation: the Romans inclined toward such associations between plantings and parades (cf. Verg. *G.* 2.274–83). As so often at Rome, politics and art were easily combined, especially when politics could assume the garb of community achievement.

The technical capabilities of the Roman stage were by this time entirely equal to the task of managing such lavish displays. Casts had already grown quite large. Lucullus, for example, was once asked to furnish 100 cloaks for a tragedy, clear evidence of an impressive show as well as his famously impressive purse (Hor. *Ep.* 1.6.40–41). Nor was artistic integrity an essential ingredient for success. The Hellenistic tendency to sacrifice aesthetic coherence to histrionic display through the cutting, expansion, and reworking of classical originals no doubt encouraged the Romans' own penchant for improvised political demonstration. Cicero, for example, relished the memory of how, at the Floralia of 57, that same Aesopus, then presumably still in full voice, had turned a line of Accius' *Brutus* to Cicero's personal advantage: *Tullius, qui libertatem civibus stabiliverat* (Sest. 123). The crowd loved it (*miliens revocatum est*), though the great moment surely came at some cost to Accius' intended effect. We may well conclude that the Roman interest in tragedy lay, as Beare remarks, "not so much in the essential dramatic qualities of the performance as in externals—impressive staging, violent utterance and action, lines which might be taken as topical, the arrival of distinguished spectators, and of course any mishap which might befall either the actors or any members of the audience."³ The disruptive effects of such occurrences are all well attested for the late Republic. The tragic genre, having lost its intellectual bearings, was easily suborned by hucksters and politicians.

The very size of Pompey's new theater was a symptom, and perhaps even a cause, of the problem. Not that its size was unique or unprecedented: even the

³Beare 71. For the politicization of theatrical productions in the later Republic, see Nicolet 363–73 and Beacham 154–63.

ostensibly temporary theaters of this period could be formidable structures. M. Scaurus, as aedile in 58 B.C.E., had erected a three-story *scaena*, the first story of marble, the second of glass (an extraordinary luxury in its time), and the third of gilded wood. The lowest tier displayed 360 columns thirty-eight feet high which eventually found their way into Augustus' Theater of Marcellus, and the cavea was said to hold 80,000 spectators (Plin. *Nat.* 36.113–15). In 53, C. Curio built a double theater of wood that not only allowed simultaneous productions in the morning, but could pivot (at some risk to the spectators) in the afternoon to form a single amphitheater for gladiatorial shows. And “temporary” though it was, the structure was still being used, at least as a theater, in June of 51 (Plin. *Nat.* 36.116–20, cf. Cic. *Fam.* 8.2.1).

Such large and elaborate designs were a far cry from the more modest facilities available in the early days of the Roman theater, though even these were not necessarily the jerry-built structures we sometimes think.⁴ Nor is their size entirely unknown. Consider, for example, conditions at the early *ludi Megalenses*, which saw the production of Plautus' *Pseudolus* in 191 and four of Terence's six comedies a generation later. The playing space available for those productions is subject to measure because the games were held, as Cicero would remark, “before the temple, in the very sight of the Great Mother” (*ante templum in ipso Matris Magnae conspectu*, *Har.* 24). He means by this the precinct immediately adjoining her great temple on the Palatine hill.⁵ This was a difficult site for games, but the Republican architects made the best of it. The temple of the Magna Mater was built on a very high platform and fitted with two tiers of steps that widen toward the base. Beyond these steps was a narrow, level area, and beyond that the terraced slope of the Palatine. The temporary

⁴Tac. *Ann.* 14.20, *nam antea subitariis gradibus et scaena in tempus structa ludos edi solitos*, implies as much, but the moralizing context—conservative reaction to Nero's institution of quinquennial games in 60 C.E.—is not reliable evidence for details of Roman theater production 300 years earlier. See in general Duckworth 79–82 and Beacham 67–69.

⁵By the late Republican period, the shows may have extended to the foot of the Palatine, where a second temporary theater was erected in the area called the Lupercal. This, at least, is the easiest way to understand Cicero's perplexing allusion in this speech—an allusion both colored and clouded by its anti-Clodian rhetoric—to two theaters at the *Megalenses* (*Har.* 25). See Hanson 14 n. 29 and Wiseman 1974: 168–69, a more elegant explanation than that of Lenaghan 124–25. There is no need, however, to assume so elaborate an arrangement in the early second century. For the theatrical possibilities of the temple of Cybele itself, see Hanson 13–16 and the important archeological supplement (with helpful plans and elevations showing the size and shape of the production space) by Pensabene 54–67. Discussion of seating in the early Roman theater (e.g., Moore) should perhaps distinguish more carefully between sacred and secular venues.

stage and scene building for the annual ludi would have occupied this level space, which means that the temple steps themselves must have accommodated the audience, since there was not room for another grandstand in the precinct. Yet the temple steps at their widest measured not much more than forty meters across, and the wedge-shaped area before the temple offered little room for the stage building and wings needed to marshal and display large processions. The Palatine slope is too near and too steep. Plautus' theater was thus, at least by later standards, comparatively intimate and necessarily restrained in its stage effects.

Other temples were also used for staging shows of various kinds. The ludi Florales, made regular in 173, were held before Flora's temple. The ludi Apollinares were theatrical from their inception in 212 (Ennius' *Thyestes* was produced for them in 169), and a temple venue is likely. In 179, the censor M. Aemilius Lepidus negotiated contracts for seats and a stage before Apollo's temple (*theatrum et proscenium ad Apollinis...locavit*, Liv. 40.51.3). Pompey's theater, with its temple of Venus set above the cavea, perhaps deliberately recalled this traditional practice: he is said to have referred to the structure as "a Temple of Venus beneath which we have added seats for the shows," and so, as seen from a distance, it was.⁶ Yet Pompey's stage, though typical enough of its own day, was at least twice the size of anything erected before the shrine of Cybele. It measured some ninety-five meters across, and this vast difference in scale suggests a difference in function. Something was expected to fill so much space, and that something meant not just mules and mixing-bowls but the time and expense necessary to orchestrate their display. A performance in a theater this large was necessarily different in quality *and* quantity from the comparatively intimate surroundings of the old temple sites.

Nor were the Hellenistic productions from which Roman poets formed their notions of tragedy particularly rich in intellectual content.⁷ The *Rhesus*, for

⁶Pompey ap. Tert. *Spect.* 10.5: *non theatrum sed Veneris templum nuncupavit, cui subiecimus, inquit, gradus spectaculorum*. Gleason 21 reconstructs a perspective that would have created precisely this illusion of seats leading up to the temple when viewed from the Curia. For the political controversy (and cultural statement) surrounding the building of this theater, see Gruen 205–10.

⁷Given the recurrent efforts to deduce fifth-century models for Roman tragedy, it remains worth pointing out that Romans necessarily brought Hellenistic sensibilities to their reading of *all* tragedy, whatever its original aesthetic. This was an age that could produce Euripides' *Hippolytus* without a chorus (*PSorb.* 2252) and give a *tragoedus* a chorus without a play (*PLEid.* 510). See Gentili 19–21, Tarrant 1978, and for a nice example of what such sensibilities entailed, Frank 16–27.

example, which survives in the Euripidean corpus but is almost certainly a work of the early fourth century, contains brilliant scenic effects and sly inversions of its Homeric material: the play is performed, and the playwright reminds us that it is being performed, as the events of *Iliad* 10 take place in the wings. Its exciting, episodic plot, however, moves by fits and starts to no particular resolution. The dramatist seems strikingly unable to make his superficially rich action mean anything to anyone. Though *Rhesus* would have given its audience quite a good time in the theater, no very deep thoughts would have followed them out of it. So too, I suspect, with Roman tragedy even in its golden age. Cicero, for example, liked to color his philosophical treatises with long and enthusiastic quotations from tragedy, but the effect was invariably to animate rather than to advance the discussion at hand. Thus he shows us what divine possession is by quoting Cassandra's mad scene from Ennius' *Alexander* in his *de Divinatione* (1.66); at *Tusculan Disputations* 3.45, the formidable anguish of the Ennian Andromache becomes a stick to beat the trite comforts afforded by the doctrines of Epicurus. Such scenes were clearly memorable. Cicero often comments aside on their power and beauty—but not on their content. He does not describe tragic action to advance an argument by evoking what characters do or think on the stage as distinct from what they feel. The theater he knew was a theater more of style and emotion than of intellect.

Yet the Romans never lost their fascination with tragedy. Cicero disliked extravagant revivals precisely because he liked the old plays themselves, and there were eventually new plays to like as well. Accius, who died about 90 B.C.E., was the last professional tragedian at Rome, the last poet to make his literary reputation on the strength of his dramatic scripts. Yet he was not the last to write tragedies of note. Varius, one of the better poets of the Augustan age, wrote a tragedy of more than passing success, and so did Ovid. In fact, Melpomene's footprints (if not always her actual songs) remain discernible for at least another century in the record of Roman literary activity. The genre did come to change profoundly, however, in that period, and those changes were not all for the bad.

II.

The first thing to understand about Roman tragedy after Accius is that it underwent the same process of gentrification common to all Roman poetry. The earliest record of the transition lies with the aristocrat Julius Caesar Strabo, an aedile in 90 and an orator of note until his death in the Marian proscriptions of 87. Strabo not only wrote tragedies, he attended meetings of the professional

Collegium Poetarum, where Accius famously refused to defer to his superior social position (V. Max. 3.7.11). Despite this deliberately insulting verdict on his talent, Strabo's plays circulated long enough for Cicero to read, and excerpts from them eventually entered the grammatical tradition a generation or so later through the work of Augustus' learned freedman Verrius Flaccus. This Strabo provides but our first example of a Republican aristocrat dabbling in tragedy. Others include an eques named C. Titius, Cicero's brother Quintus, passing away a winter in Gaul by writing four tragedies in sixteen days, his commander Caesar, whose juvenilia included an *Oedipus*, Octavian, who wrote an *Ajax*, and perhaps the two sons of Horace's Piso.⁸ All the plays in question were doubtless amateur efforts of little individual significance. They were not produced, and most never even circulated. Augustus expressly forbade publication of his uncle's poetry and, as he told Varius, he preferred his own *Ajax* to fall upon his sponge (Suet. *Jul.* 56.7; *Aug.* 85; Macr. *Sat.* 2.4.2). Yet more significant attempts to write tragedy were also being made by more significant figures on the literary scene, for tragedy, like epic, still claimed a lofty place in the hierarchy of genres. Tragedies by Asinius Pollio are mentioned by Horace and Vergil and survived for Tacitus to read.⁹ Varius' *Thyestes* and Ovid's *Medea* won still greater acclaim and became canonical texts: Quintilian compared *Thyestes* favorably to the masterpieces of Greece and admired *Medea* in spite of himself (10.1.98). Thus tragedy survived at Rome, though it was no longer written by professional tragedians. Nor could it claim an extensive audience.

What kept tragedy alive in the aristocratic imagination was not the kind of lavish public spectacle that had so irritated Cicero, though spectacle too survived. Horace's letter to Augustus, for example, sounds much like Cicero's report to Marius a generation earlier:

verum equitis quoque iam migravit ab aure voluptas
 omnis ad incertos oculos et gaudia vana.
 quattuor aut plures aulae premuntur in horas,
 dum fugiunt equitum turmae peditumque catervae;
 mox trahitur manibus regum fortuna retortis,
 esseda festinant, pilenta, petorrita, naves,
 captivum portatur ebur, captiva Corinthus.

⁸The sources are Cic. *Brut.* 167 (Titius) and *Q. fr.* (Q. Cicero); Suet. *Jul.* 56.7 (Caesar) and *Aug.* 85 (Augustus); Hor. *Ep.* 2.3.366–90 (the Pisones). Fantham 5–6 provides helpful discussion.

⁹Hor. *Carm.* 2.1.9–12; Verg. *Ecl.* 8.9 with Serv. ad loc.; Tac. *Dial.* 21.7. Pollio, however, did not earn inclusion in Quintilian's canon of Roman tragedians at *Inst.* 10.1.97–98.

Nowadays even the knights have stopped listening, and all their interest is taken up with inane and ephemeral pageants. The curtain is up for four-hour periods, if not longer, as squadrons of cavalry and hordes of infantry hurtle past; fallen kings are dragged across with their hands pinioned; chariots, carriages, wagons and ships rumble along, carrying works of bronze and ivory taken from Corinth. (*Ep.* 2.1.187–93, tr. Rudd)

Whether Horace is really thinking of tragedy, or confusing it with historical pageantry or even triumphal processions, remains unclear, and that lack of clarity is precisely the point. Although there were still shows aplenty to be found at Rome, plays of stature were becoming scarce on the public stage. In fact, Varius' *Thyestes*, performed either in conjunction with Octavian's triumphal celebrations of 29 B.C.E. or at the restored *ludi Apollinares* of 28, is the only documented stage success by a Roman poet after Accius.¹⁰ Its closest known contemporary, Ovid's *Medea*, has no production history, and Ovid himself claimed in a different context that he had never staged a play (*Tr.* 5.7.27). He may have feared the kind of humiliation eventually meted out to Pomponius Secundus, *consul ordinarius* under Claudius in 44 C.E. and governor of Upper Germany in 50/51. Secundus was a poet of note, better known among his peers as a tragedian than for his victory over the Chatti: he was nevertheless booed in the public theater when one of his works was performed there (*Tac. Ann.* 11.13, cf. 12.27–28).

With mimes, pantomimes, and other public spectacles on the rise, tragedy began losing its popular audience. It may well be true, as scholars like Slater and Wiseman (1995) have been insisting, that theater was and remained central to the process of Roman self-fashioning, but by Horace's day theaters were no longer the poets' preserve. A distinction between popular entertainment and literary theater that would have been as incomprehensible to second-century Romans as to fifth-century Athenians now becomes an increasingly significant

¹⁰We do not know how elaborate and how public its production was. Our main source is an isolated didascalic note of maddening imprecision that survives in two manuscripts of the eighth and ninth centuries: *Lucius Varius cognomento Rufus Thyesten tragoediam magna cura absoluto post Actiacam victoriam augusto ludis eius in scaena edidit pro qua fabula sestertium deciens accepit*. The text is variously emended. See Jocelyn 1980 and more broadly Cova 9–27. The million sesterces does not necessarily imply a lavish performance: the gift may have been not a *quid pro quo* but the reward for long service, rather like Horace's Sabine farm. See Coffey 46–47.

fact of Roman stage history. Under the Principate, literary drama began to abandon public theaters for the more intimate (and more aristocratic) confines of smaller roofed halls and private homes. Recitation rather than fully staged performance became the norm, the kind of performance long established for the presentation of Latin literary works. This did not necessarily make plays designed for recitation trivial. By the 70s C.E., according to Tacitus, something still called tragedy could serve the profoundly serious and even perilous cause of Curiatius Maternus: his *Cato* created a sensation when recited privately before an audience of friends and was the talk of the town even before a polished text began circulating.¹¹ This shift to the private sphere, however, had important consequences for tragedy as a genre.

Maternus' next play was to be a *Thyestes*, which suggests the collapse of the old Republican distinction between plays with Roman subjects (the so-called *praetextae*) and those on Greek themes. *Praetextae*, first created by Naevius in the days of Hannibal, probably had political overtones from the beginning, but we do not know when tragedies in the Greek style were first written to be topical. The political overtones that stirred crowds at the tragic revivals of the late Republic (above, n. 3) are not attested for the original productions of those plays, nor is a political message easily imagined for Varius' *Thyestes* in the 20s. Abuse of Agamemnon in a play by Mamercus Aemilius Scaurus offended Tiberius, but it is impossible to know whether the play was political by design or whether Scaurus merely fell victim to Macro's malicious imaginings.¹² Maternus' plays remain unique in the record.¹³ Politics, or politics alone, does not explain tragedy's enduring appeal among Roman aristocrats.

¹¹Tac. *Dial.* 2–3. The potency of such tragedy is rightly stressed by Bartsch 98–105. For recitation in general see Mayor 173–82, and for recitation of specifically dramatic verse, Zwierlein 156–66. Williams 303–6 observes the stylistic effect of recitation on poetry. The spread of roofed theaters in the empire suggests small-scale public performances as well as the private recitations recorded, for example, by the younger Pliny (*Ep.* 1.15.2, 5.3.2, 9.36.4), whose own taste apparently ran toward comedy (which was better for his digestion). On the development of small public theaters, a topic that merits further research, see Izenour.

¹²For the *praetextae*, see Wiseman 1994: 12–20, challenged now on points of detail by Flower. Lefèvre 1976: 15–20 based his reconstruction of Varius' *Thyestes* on a presumption of political content, but neither presumption nor reconstruction has won acceptance. Cf. Jocelyn 1978, Tarrant 1979, and Cova 19–23. For Scaurus, see Tac. *Ann.* 6.29, D.C. 58.24, Suet. *Tib.* 61.

¹³Neither Maternus nor his plays is otherwise attested, encouraging Bartsch 260–61 n. 68 to doubt their historicity. The literary climate evoked by the *Dialogus*, however, must at least have been congruent with the expectations of Tacitus' audience.

Nor does their abiding admiration for its style. Educated Romans had always mined the old tragic scripts for literary tags and purple passages. We know, for example, of Republican tragedy's capacity for depicting violent and pathetic emotion precisely because these qualities attracted its later readers. Thus Cicero's fondness for quoting tragedy to illustrate moments of madness and rage is echoed nearly two centuries later by Quintilian, who documents the point that nobody wants to appear as bad as he is with only a passing allusion to Sallust's Catiline, but explicit quotation of Varius' Thyestes: *iam fero infandissima, iam facere cogor* (3.8.45). These allusions to classical masterpieces, however, are little more than stylistic flourishes. Something more is needed to explain why Roman aristocrats *kept* writing tragedies, and why plays written under the Caesars eventually won the enduring fame that so thoroughly eluded their predecessors.

Besides its somewhat florid style, Republican tragedy was also known for its argumentative quality. This feature proved especially attractive and useful to rhetorical writers. In Cicero's youth, the anonymous author of the *Rhetorica ad Herennium* culled illustrations of good and bad argument from tragic texts (e.g., 2.34–42), and Cicero himself had Crassus of *de Oratore* illustrate different styles of delivery with a long series of tragic quotations (3.217–19). Quintilian not only praised Roman tragedy highly for its stylistic attractions (cf. 10.1.97–98) but extolled the thrust and parry of Accius' dialogue. Yet Accius, he reports, also knew the difference between the stage and the courtroom: "They say that Accius, when asked why he did not plead cases since his tragedies showed such skill in repartee, gave this explanation, that the things said in his plays were what he wanted to say, while in court his opponents would say what he did not want them to say" (5.15.43). This was an important distinction, and not just for educators. It was precisely this distinction that C. Albucius Silus, one of the great Augustan declaimers, learned to his cost when he unwisely entered the rough-and-tumble of the centumviral court. He proposed an extravagant oath, a well-known rhetorical figure, only to have the opposing counsel take him at his word and express his client's willingness to swear it (*Sen. Con.* 7 Prf. 6–7, cf. 9 Prf. 2–5). That miscalculation cost Albucius both the case and his self-respect. No such mishap was possible in the declaimers' artificial debates. Nor could it happen in tragedy, which had become the verse equivalent of declamation.

The ubiquity of recitation as a medium for bringing literature to its audience doubtless encouraged the assimilation of poetry to the demands of

rhetorical display. This may well have been the secret of Ovid's success with his *Medea*, which apparently struck a happy balance between inspiration and discipline. Quintilian quotes one of its *sententiae* with approval (*Inst.* 8.5.6: *servare potui: perdere an possim rogas?*) and clearly admired the whole.¹⁴ Ovid was an accomplished declaimer, and the declamatory style may have seemed less contrived in his tragedy than it sometimes appeared to readers of his epic and elegy. That must remain a guess, but the compatibility of declamation and tragedy is certain in the case of Seneca. His plays are not just generally rhetorical in style but specifically declamatory in conception, and it is here that the effect of rhetoric on tragedy is therefore easiest to measure.

III.

The rhetorical quality of Senecan tragedy is an old and yet neglected scholarly topos. Its modern history goes back to Friedrich Leo, who devoted a section of his *Observationes criticae* of 1878 to what he called "*tragoedia rhetorica*." There he set out to show how a rhetorical influence distinguished the plays of Seneca from both his Greek and Roman predecessors. "These are not really tragedies," he concluded, "but declamations patterned after tragedy and divided into acts" (158). Because he thought the rhetorical impulse had a baneful effect on Latin literature, Leo and his disciples generally confined their investigation of its influence to matters of style and then faulted Seneca for fulfilling their expectations.¹⁵ The result could make rather dry reading, and the more sympathetic line of Senecan criticism that has since emerged understandably looks in other directions. Attention to Seneca's philosophical roots, for example, has shown not just how Stoic vocabulary underlies his diction, but how Stoicism furnished a powerful intellectual foundation for his tragic constructions and insured their lasting appeal (e.g., Braden, Lefèvre 1985, Rosenmeyer). Senecan drama, however, is not only philosophical: rhetorical criticism should also have something to say about the substance of his tragedy. Leo's basic perception of the *tragoedia rhetorica* remains true. The new point to make is simply that rhetoric's influence on tragedy extends far beyond the

¹⁴*Inst.* 10.1.98: *Ovidi Medea videtur mihi ostendere quantum ille vir praestare potuerit si ingenio suo imperare quam indulgere maluisset*. Cf. the comments of Leo 148–49, Currie 2702–4, and Arcellaschi 261–64. The elder Seneca found the play somewhat bookish, full of Vergilian echoes that proclaimed rather than concealed the debt (*Suas.* 3.7). For Ovid in the declamation hall, see *Sen. Con.* 2.2.8–12.

¹⁵Of the studies directly fostered by Leo's pioneering work, Canter remains most valuable for its comprehensive examination of Seneca's debt to rhetorical practice. Bonner 160–67 provides a useful overview.

tropes, figures, and *sententiae* that Leo's students catalogued. Nor is that influence necessarily baneful. Rather than simply observing, and then dismissing, rhetoric as the source of mannerisms and verbal pyrotechnics (though it was certainly that), we might productively argue that rhetoric—in particular declamation—was a positive influence on Roman tragedy because it asserted the primacy of language over spectacle. The declamatory model that shaped Seneca's idea of tragedy thereby brought the genre out of the intellectual doldrums that had so exasperated Cicero and Horace. To argue this case requires only some sympathy for the declamatory enterprise and its effect on both the writing and the reception of tragedy. Consider, for example, a famous Senecan moment.

As we begin the last act of *Thyestes*, Thyestes has been fed his own children's flesh. Now Atreus, eager to claim the reward of his infamy, is about to display his handiwork. He orders his servants to unbolt the palace doors and reveal the scene of feasting within.

turba famularis, fores
templi relaxa, festa patefiat domus.
libet videre, capita natorum intuens,
quos det colores, verba quae primus dolor
effundat aut ut spiritu expulso stupens
corpus rigescat. fructus hic operis mei est;
miserum videre nolo, sed dum fit miser. (901–7)

The curious expression *quos det colores*, says Richard Tarrant (1985: 219), means “what complexion he shows (i.e., how his face turns red and pale by turns).” Atreus thus is saying,

Servants, loosen the palace
doors, let the festive house lie open.
I want to see, as he inspects his childrens' heads,
what complexion he shows, what words his first
sorrow pours out or how, gasping and shocked,
his body stiffens. This is the reward of my work:
I want to see him not wretched, but becoming wretched.

Tarrant's gloss is certainly correct, but it is not complete. The word *colores* can refer not only to facial complexion.

Those schooled in rhetoric, which of course means both Seneca and his audience, would also hear in *color* its technical sense, i.e., the kind of plea a

speaker makes, the line of argument, the “complexion” he puts on the case at hand. Though never more than a loose assemblage of attitudes, postures, and rationales, the *colores* were nevertheless fundamental to declamation, where success often depended on the apt and inventive twists given to familiar topics (Bonner 55–56; Fairweather 166–78). Atreus, as he awaits Thyestes’ appearance, thus wonders what *color* he will assume and how original its application will be. We may thus also hear his words like this:

I want to see, as he inspects his childrens’ heads,
what face he puts on this: what words his first
sorrow pours out or how, gasping and shocked,
his body stiffens.

Rather than thinking in sequence of Thyestes’ expression, words, and bearing, Atreus would be employing a much tighter construction: the words and the bearing create the *color*.¹⁶

Whichever way we choose to hear the expression, there is no doubt that a Roman audience would have shared Atreus’ curiosity, for Thyestes’ condition was a famous topos. By the first century C.E., not only had his banquet become emblematic of tragedy, but his impassioned response to its horror had become a rhetorical cliché.¹⁷ Seneca’s father, for example, represents anger as a distinctly Thyestean *color*:

colorem ex altera parte, quae durior est, Latro aiebat hunc sequendum,
ut gravissimarum iniuriarum inexorabilia et ardentia induceremus odia
Thyesteo more...

Latro said that on the other side, which is more difficult, we should
follow the *color* of representing unremitting and passionate hatred,
arising from the gravest injuries, Thyestes-wise. (Sen. *Con.* 1.1.21, tr.
Winterbottom)

¹⁶For *color* in the metaphoric sense of a (good) complexion put on behavior, cf. Quint. *Inst.* 3.8.44: *dandus illis deformibus color*. At 915–16 Atreus uses the term more literally in referring to his victims’ blood at the banquet: *veteris hunc Bacchi color abscondet*.

¹⁷So Porphyrio glosses the *Thyesteas preces* of Hor. *Epod.* 5.86 as *diras execrationes qualibus in tragoediis Thyestes Atreum execratur*. At *Ars* 2.3.91, the *cena Thyestae* is equated with tragedy itself (cf. 186); Cic. *Tusc.* 4.77, quoting Accius, makes Thyestes the personification of *ira*.

Small wonder that Atreus should wonder—or at least Seneca’s audience should hear him wondering—what *colores* this new Thyestes will employ.

Such conscious and even metatheatrical allusion to the content and technique of declamation has two important ramifications for the appreciation of Roman tragedy. The first involves the audience. Modern readers, encouraged in part by the parodies and sneers we find in Petronius and Juvenal, tend to regard declamation as a dry and stale exercise, or at best as a source of effete and even immoral sophistries. Think, says Juvenal (6.279–85), of the unfaithful wife.

sed iacet in servi complexibus aut equitis. ‘dic,
dic aliquem sodes hic, Quintiliane, colorem.’
haeremus. dic ipsa. ‘olim convenerat,’ inquit
‘ut faceres tu quod velles, nec non ego possem
indulgere mihi. clames licet et mare caelo
confundas, homo sum.’ nihil est audacius illis
deprensis: iram atque animos a crimine sumunt.

She is lying in the arms of a slave or (worse!) a banker.
“Please, Quintilian, give me some *color*.”
We’re stuck. Speak for yourself. “We agreed long ago,”
she says, “that you could do as you like, and I could please
myself. Rant on until you bring heaven down to earth.
I am human.” Nothing is brasher than women
caught in the act. Crime feeds their anger and their energy.

This example is not wholly fictitious. The elder Seneca reports what was apparently a real case in which a woman was found with a handsome slave in her bedroom. Her husband divorced her and prosecuted the slave for adultery. The wife defended the slave.¹⁸ “There was need for some *color*,” says Seneca in discussing the ensuing arguments, “since she had been seen in the bedroom with a slave and her husband” (*Con.* 2.1.34–36). He preserves several of the *colores* employed on the occasion, not all of them as brazen as Juvenal’s, along with the spirited exchanges that followed. The victorious pleader (for the husband, apparently) was Vallius Syriacus, whose wit earned great applause.

The case is interesting not only for the opportunity it affords to compare the handling of a topos in both literary and rhetorical contexts. Seneca’s admiring analysis of declaimers at work is a good antidote to Juvenal’s

¹⁸For the slave-defendant in such a case, presumably under the *lex Iulia de adulteriis coercendis*, see Mette-Dittmann 50 n. 132. I owe both the legal explanation and the reference to Thomas McGinn.

cynicism, for the spectators' keen and enthusiastic response to the performance of the advocates belies the poet's charge of tedium. Rhetorical education forged a common bond between declaimers and audiences. Laughter, shouts, applause, sharp retorts, and sudden interruptions were everyday occurrences in the declamation hall. Declamation before adult audiences—school exercises were something else again—was a boisterous exercise, with cheers to greet every effective gesture and clever turn of phrase and hecklers ready to deride the unwary and the inept, a spectator sport for highly engaged spectators.¹⁹ To watch a Cestius or Latro perform was not just like watching a master take the stage, but like watching him perform the piece you yourself played last week or had struggled to play in your youth.

In recalling that bond, Atreus' allusion to his brother's *colores* encourages a similar tie between the play and its audience. Reading Seneca rhetorically requires us not just to recognize certain mannerisms and their sources but to set his text against a background of shared experiences that unites speakers who are reaching as far as they can with spectators fully prepared to applaud their successes and mock their failures.²⁰ The atmosphere would thus have been lively and highly charged. Rhetoric becomes a source of energy, not tedium. Let us then rejoin Atreus and his audience as they discover what *colores* Thyestes does in fact employ.

It is not the *color* of "unremitting and passionate hatred." When Thyestes appears, he at first persists in thinking he has shared a banquet of reconciliation, and he is therefore perplexed and confused by his own sense of foreboding (965–69). This weakness extends throughout the revelation of catastrophe. Though never at a loss for words—he will have three emotional speeches in the scene to come (1006–21, 1035–51, 1068–96)—his words consistently lack power. Appeals to heaven are unanswered, and his brother is of course unmoved. Atreus himself speaks comparatively little (his one longish speech at 1052–68 is an aside), but his words are vicious in their taunting, riddling style.

¹⁹For the cheers, cf. Sen. *Con.* 2.13.19, 9 Prf. 2, Quint. 2.2.9–12, 8.5.13–14; for criticism and heckling, Sen. *Con.* 2.4.12–13, 3 Prf. 16.

²⁰Whether this audience was notional or real and whether the plays were written with full stage performance in mind hardly matter, though (as far as I can see) nothing much is added to the effect of a Senecan play by a visual component or lost by its absence. For careful roasting of this Senecan chestnut, see Fantham 34–49 and Braden 230–31 n. 14; the issue is examined from a different perspective by Sutton 57–62.

THYESTES

redde iam natos mihi! 997

ATREUS

reddam, et tibi illos nullus eripiet dies.

....

Expedi amplexus, pater; 1004
venere. natos ecquid agnoscis tuos?

THYESTES

agnosco fratrem...

frater hic fratrem rogo: 1027
sepelire liceat. redde quod cernas statim
uri; nihil te genitor habiturus rogo,
sed perditurus.

ATREUS

quidquid ē natis tuis
superest habes, quodcumque non superest habes.

THYESTES

utrumne saevis pabulum alitibus iacent,
an beluis scinduntur, an pascunt feras?

ATREUS

epulatus ipse es impia natos dape.

THYESTES

Give me back my sons!

ATREUS

So I shall: no day will ever take them from you.

....

Prepare your embrace, Father.
They have come. Do you recognize your sons?

THYESTES

I recognize my brother...

... I ask my brother this as a brother:
Allow their burial. Return what you will straightaway see
burned; I ask you as a father not for something to have
but to lose.

ATREUS

You have what remains of
your sons, and what does not remain you have.

THYESTES

Do they lie exposed as food for savage birds,
or are they torn apart by beasts, or nourish wild things?

ATREUS

You have yourself made an impious banquet of your sons.

Atreus' desire to see Thyestes not just wretched but *becoming* wretched (*miserum videre nolo, sed dum fit miser*, 907) necessitates this slow, deliberate, and inexorable progress toward the truth. Thyestes is almost childlike in his dependence and pitiful in the ignorance which Atreus so cruelly mocks. His one potentially great retort, *agnosco fratrem*, is founded on error: he does *not* yet know his brother. He will not know him fully until Atreus spells out the extent of his crime boldly and unequivocally at 1034. And what happens then? Still no *ardentia odia*, but only more vain appeals and a strikingly weak *sententia*, *genitor en natos premo / premorque natis* (1050–51). There are even more turns of the screw to come until Atreus, satisfied at last, proclaims his satisfaction: *perdideram scelus, nisi sic doleres* (1097–98).

All this anguish and all this horror are brought about entirely by Atreus' ability to manipulate speech. What could have been a culminating action, the display of the children's heads and hands at 1004, is deliberately undercut by Thyestes' ignorance of all that these relics imply. The bare fact of kindred murder is not the issue of maximum importance: this is only half the expected revelation. We are still waiting for Thyestes' discovery that he has himself committed the final outrage against nature. Yet Seneca deliberately postpones that decisive moment. The effect on Thyestes of his children's death remains

incomplete at 1004 and is for this reason decidedly unclassical. Consider, by way of contrast, two other possible arrangements of the discovery.

As Aristotle pointed out, the most effective recognitions combine objects and actions to reveal simultaneously both a fact and its full significance: *anagnorisis*, to use the technical terms, then brings about *peripeteia* (*Po.* 55a20). The ghoulish display of *Thyestes* could certainly have worked this way. That is how Herodotus orchestrated a similar revelation in telling the story of Astyages' revenge on Harpagus for saving the infant Cyrus. Harpagus is entertained at dinner and then ordered to lift the lid of the remaining dish, which conceals the head, hands, and feet of his only son: "As he kept control of himself and did not lose his head at the dreadful sight, Astyages asked him if he knew what animal it was whose flesh he had eaten. 'I know, my lord,' was Harpagus' reply....He said no other word, but took up what remained of the flesh and went home" (1.119). Ovid in the *Metamorphoses* replaced the quiet poignancy of Harpagus' anguish with something more energetic. When Tereus, having completed his equally horrid meal, asks for his son Itys, Procne replies with a riddle and Philomela with an action (6.655–59):

'Intus habes, quem poscis' ait. circumspicit ille
atque ubi sit quaerit...
prosiluit Ityosque caput Philomela cruentum
misit in ora patris...

"You have inside whom you seek," she says. He looks
around and asks where he is...
Up jumped Philomela and hurled Itys' bloody head
into his father's face...

Tereus at once leaps from the table, clutching his middle. His recognition and reversal of fortune are simultaneous and complete.

Seneca doubtless had this second example in mind: Atreus' riddle (*quidquid e natis tuis superest habes...*) is but a heightened version of Procne's. The pace of discovery in Seneca is nevertheless very different. He separates the pitiful remnants of the crime from the banquet they supplied, and his Thyestes, unlike Tereus, is too slow-witted and ineffective to see unaided the connection between them. Like the phantom opponent of a declamation, he remains only a foil. Atreus alone controls the pace of recognition. He is very much the impresario, and he is helped immeasurably by the fact that his victim, again like the imaginary adversaries of declamatory debate, says only what suits his

purpose. Though the exercise of real power was what enabled Atreus to punish his brother by killing his children, it was rhetorical power that granted his true wish, which was to watch Thyestes become wretched in consequence of that act. This formidable contrivance insures that the horror will lie not in the deed but in its revelation. The resulting intellectual tension springs directly from Seneca's effort to understand the forces he observed at work in the world in the terms that his education had provided.

The success of this new formula had a profound effect on tragedy because rhetoric had given Seneca not just a technical skill—the choice of *colores* and dexterity in manipulating the language that creates them—but confidence in the power of that manipulation. Action became secondary when the dramatist could describe effectively what might then, perhaps mercifully, remain unseen.²¹ This new reliance on language reversed the tendency toward action and spectacle we saw developing in Cicero's day. The balance between seen and unseen action characteristic of Greek drama had tilted significantly by the end of the Republic as technical capabilities grew and popular tastes changed. The inevitable result was not just the immense mule train of Accius' *Clytemnestra* but the eventual flooding of the orchestra to accommodate seafights and the bizarre, often gruesome tableaux of the later Principate (Suet. *Nero* 12.2, cf. Coleman 67–73). In the process, literary drama ceased to be popular entertainment. This loss of a popular audience could have spelled the end of tragedy as it certainly spelled the end of comedy, but it did not.²² Tragedy instead took on a new life in a new environment by reclaiming its literary heritage and becoming once again a vehicle for serious literary endeavor.

* * * *

This investigation began with Cicero's dismay at a public show. A fitting end is Claudius' delight at a private one. While walking one day on the Palatine, says Pliny, the emperor was stopped in his tracks by a clamor in the vicinity. When he learned that the source of the commotion was a recitation by Nonianus, he

²¹Thus even the infamous finale of *Phaedra* (1247ff.), where Theseus reassembles the broken body of his son, is less remarkable for ghoulish display—we do not necessarily see or need to see what Theseus sees—than for the wretched father's (verbal) process of recognition and lament.

²²Comedy did not become rhetorical, and so it did not come to excite the aristocratic imagination as tragedy did. For the rhetoricians' use of comedy, see Goldberg.

headed straight for the room and took a seat.²³ The story reminds us both that a recitation could be thought a pleasure and that it was not a sedate occasion. Applause in the Roman world, the kind of clamor that caught Claudius' attention across the Palatine, meant not hand-clapping or even table-rapping but loud shouts of *pulchre!*, *bene!*, and *recte!*²⁴ Nor was Claudius' enthusiasm for recitations unusual. Though Martial may complain of their tedium, large, enthusiastic, and responsive audiences eagerly heard and passed judgment on the latest works of poetry and history.²⁵ When tragedy abandoned the public stage for the private hall, it therefore gained at least as much as it lost. Once language found a way to eclipse spectacle, dramatists were free to portray emotional and intellectual problems ill-suited to the massive theaters of Pompey and Marcellus. And those problems were not trivial. Curiatius Maternus could be thought to electrify friends with a reading of his *Cato*, and even after tragedy had lost that political charge, its psychological power survived through Seneca to capture the imagination of the Renaissance and reintroduce the tragic genre to the modern world. As Gordon Braden observes, "The Renaissance goes to Seneca rather than to the Greeks not because Greek is harder to learn, but because of serious interest in the story which Senecan rhetoric is suited to tell" (68). That is no small achievement, and Latin scholarship would do well to take note of it. Declamatory rhetoric may (though I think wrongly) be the scholar's despair, but it was certainly the salvation of tragedy.

²³Plin. *Ep.* 1.13.3. The setting was presumably the Domus Tiberiana. M. Servilius Nonianus, Persius' patron, was a distinguished orator and historian. Cf. his death notice in Tac. *Ann.* 14.19.

²⁴So Hor. *Ars* 428. Other favorite shouts of approval included *belle*, εὖγε, and σοφῶς, which is why Plin. *Ep.* 2.14.5 calls hired *clauquers* σοφοκλεῖς. Testimonia in Mayor 177–79.

²⁵With such characteristic barbs as Mart. 2.88, 8.20, and 11.52, contrast Plin. *Ep.* 5.3.8–11 on the value of recitation, although he too knew (and wrote of) its occasional tedium.

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