

9: SENECA DRAMA AND THE AGE OF NERO

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9.1 TRAGEDIES IN AN IRON MASK

The year 65 CE brought a conspiracy to finally rid Rome of its actor-singer emperor. The details of the so-called Pisonian plot to kill Nero are related by Tacitus (Ann. 15.48–74), who emphasizes the general confusion and cowardice of the perpetrators; among them, only a few – the tribune Subrius Flavus, the centurion Sulpicius Aper, and the freed-woman Epicharis – bore death nobly when the plot was revealed. Another resolute figure was Seneca, who did not participate in the plan, but was ordered to kill himself after being falsely implicated. Seneca was rumored to be the plotters' best hope for the new regime: they planned first to have the princeps killed by Gaius Calpurnius Piso, a leading statesman, and then to get rid of Piso himself (Ann. 15.65). The Empire would be handed over to Seneca, who (they felt) was widely recognized as preeminent in virtue. As one of the supporters of the plot, Subrius Flavus, said of Piso, it would not have made much difference in terms of infamy (*dedecus*) to replace a cithara player with a tragedy performer. Indeed, Tacitus points out, just as Nero used to sing to the lyre, Piso would sing in tragic dress (*ut Nero cithara, ita Piso tragico ornatu canebat*).

Flavus' witticism depicts the transition of power from Nero to Piso as a simple change of performative mode. Flavus mentions two types of performance: *citharoedia* and tragic song, modes of performance that were similar but not identical. Both were very much in fashion at the time. The coup's conspirers looked to Seneca to play a more dignified role. Yet all of the performers, including Nero, met tragic ends. It is as if Neronian theatricality in some way affected the staging of imperial power as well.¹

¹ In general, on Neronian theatricality, see Bartsch 1994; Edwards 1994; Erasmo 2004: 52–140; Littlewood 2015.

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One reason why Nero's era has so often been taken as theatrical is that Tacitus has famously larded into his description of it the themes and trappings of tragedy (see Grau, Chapter 16 in this volume). Set against such a background, Piso, and even more so Seneca, feature as performing characters interacting with a performing prince. Such a theatricalization of imperial power emerges clearly also in the ps. Senecan *Octavia*, probably composed during the Flavian era. In the play Nero is transformed into a tragic tyrant while Seneca is turned into a tragic failed advisor-figure (*satelles*). As Littlewood rightly argues, "there is a particular irony in reading Seneca himself caught in Tacitus and the ps. Senecan *Octavia* in tragedies of his own making." However, focusing on this representative strategy also has a disturbing and dangerous side effect that has distorted the reception of Seneca's tragedies. Given that not only the *Annals* but also the *Octavia* associate Nero's performing power with tragedy – and given, of course, Nero's many performances on stage – Seneca's own plays have been caught in a sort of hermeneutical "iron mask" that has determined that they should always be about Nero.

One can see a striking parallel between the fate of the Domus Aurea's set designer, the painter Famulus, and the reception of Senecan tragedy. The Domus eventually turned into a jail for Famulus (see La Rocca, Chapter 13 in this volume). In like manner, the pervasive theatricality that characterizes both Nero's conceptualization of his own political role and modern readings of the Neronian age has forced Seneca's tragedy into a narrow interpretative space. This chapter endeavors to break free of that space as a means of gaining a fresh perspective on the Neronian character of Seneca's dramatic production. My aim will be to consider how Seneca's plays relate to aspects of Neronian culture other than the theatricality of imperial power; that is, I will examine the possibility of looking at the plays without reading Nero's grotesque masks into the tragedies' characters.

Significantly, art historians face a similar methodological challenge. The study of Neronian wall painting must deal with a crucial hermeneutical problem: how to disentangle the developments of the genre, in particular the Fourth style, which is characteristic of the second half of the first century CE, from the influence exerted by imperial patronage. Indeed, the theatricality of Nero's performing power seems to be inextricably bound with the iconographic revival of the *scaenae frons* (the architectural backdrop of the stage) and other theatrical motifs

² Littlewood 2015: 166.

³ For Nero's tragic roles and masks, see Suet. Nero 21.3.

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in contemporary wall paintings. By looking at perspective not only as a stylistic device, but rather as an organizational principle arranging shapes and objects within a space and defining the relationship between the image and its beholders, art historians have been able to find new ways to explore the theatricality of Neronian wall painting. Similarly in literary studies, we need to find new ways to synchronize two different systems of meaning; that is, Nero's performing power and Seneca's theatricality. And we need to break free of the vicious circle wherein Seneca's tragedies are read against the background of Neronian literary taste at the same time as they are regarded as having a major impact on that taste.

Tellingly, the most recent studies dealing with the chronology of Seneca's tragedies ascribe most of them to the reign of Claudius, or, at the latest, to the early stages of Nero's reign and Seneca's career as a politician (*Agamemnon*, *Phaedra*, and *Oedipus* may be dated to the period of the exile, or else right before/after; *Troades*, *Medea*, and *Hercules Furens* should be dated around 54 CE, but again they might also be earlier). Only the *Thyestes* and *Phoenissae* seem to belong to a later period and were probably composed during the years of retirement. Needless to say, we cannot draw any reliable conclusions from a highly hypothetical chronology. And yet the large chronological span seems to suggest that Seneca's tragedies must not be regarded as a product only of the Neronian age.

In what follows I shall examine the ideological and aesthetic connections that link Seneca's tragedies to the politics of the age of Nero and imperial power more generally rather than to Nero's own biography (§§2–3); the strategies whereby spatiality, narrative, and perception are negotiated both in Neronian art and in Seneca's plays (§§4–5); and the way in which Seneca's tragedies interact with other dramatic genres of their age (§6).

9.2 TRAGEDY AND POLITICS IN THE LOOKING GLASS: BEYOND NERO ...

The first issue to be tackled concerns the Narcissus complex affecting Seneca's modern readership. Often Seneca's tragedies are interpreted as a mirror that distorts the idealized reflection on Nero's power that one finds in the *de Clementia*, a Senecan treatise addressed to the young

⁴ Lorenz 2013. ⁵ Marshall 2014.

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emperor at the beginning of his reign. Following in the footsteps of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century theater, twentieth-century interpreters have tried to read Seneca's plays as *tragédies à clef*. Such an approach, however, is strongly marked by a positivistic-biographical bias, and it has proved ineffective in matters of chronology. Allusions to contemporary persons and/or events cannot be ruled out, but they are always highly speculative, and in the end there is no way to verify that conventional statements against tyrants, voiced by characters of myth, have anything to do with Nero himself. In fact, Nero tolerated the restaging of plays that might be taken to allude to him. It was when authors were suspected of alluding maliciously to tyranny in particular that they were forced to go underground. That said, there is no evidence that Seneca's tragedies were withheld from circulation, or that he circulated them only among close friends.

Seneca's tragedies contain certain anachronisms that could be taken to look forward to his own Neronian era, especially when it comes to their reference to uniquely Roman customs. Yet such anachronisms are compatible with Roman dramatic tradition, both comic and tragic, that had quintessentially Greek features reshaped to fit Roman practice. Such references to contemporary Roman realities need not be read politically. Some examples of such anachronisms: in *Troades*, Hecuba deems Priam blessed since he was spared the humiliation of the Argolicus (Argive, hence Greek!) triumphus (Tro. 148–56; a 'Greek triumph' is mentioned also in *Phoe.* 577–8). Of course, the triumph was a Roman institution, not a Greek one. Similarly, Theseus displays his grief for Hippolytus' death by giving his son a Roman (imperial) funeral (Phae. 1244–80). Further anachronistic details can be detected in the outlines of royal luxury (Thy. 454–7) and in female coiffure (Tro. 884–5). Some of these details match with analogous anachronisms found in mythological scenes of contemporary panel paintings. Moreover, a hint at Claudius' 43 CE expedition to Britain can be traced in *Medea's* second choral ode (364–79), while other plays seem to allude to the canal newly cut through the isthmus of Corinth, an endeavor the emperor actively promoted and emphasized.

⁶ Malaspina 2003: 294–6, 312. ⁷ Suet. Nero 46.3. ⁸ Tarrant 1995: 215–30.
On this imperial and dynastic reading of Hippolytus' funeral rites, see Degl'Innocenti Pierini
⁹ 2008: 251–75.

¹⁰ Varner 2000: 121–3.

¹¹ Plin. HN 4.10. Repeated references to the Isthmus are made in Seneca's tragedies (Ag. 562; HF 332f., 1163; Med. 35; Phae. 1024; Thy. 124–5, 181–2, 629–32). Notably, in HF 332f. the Isthmus is kept under control by Mount Citheron, which is in turn the "figure" of the tyrant Lycus (Rosati 2002: 231–2).

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Finally in the *Thyestes* we can trace a few historical and geographical details that possibly pertain to Nero's activities in the east of the Empire. The scene in which Atreus crowns his brother Thyestes (Thy. 544), recalled later by the Chorus (Thy. 599–606), might hint at the Parthian King Vologaeses, who set the diadem of Armenia round the head of his brother Tiridates (61 CE) during a short-lived truce between the two. Similarly, the fierce Alani (feri Alani) fleeing across the frozen Danube (Thy. 629–30) probably recall the kindred Rhazolani, a Sarmatian tribe who had diplomatic and military contacts with the Romans during the 60s. Finally, the mention of the so-called Caspian Ridge (the Caucasian Gate) could refer to recent Sarmatian incursions from the northeast. At times, anachronisms may disclose the autobiographical purposes of the author. In the *Thyestes*' second ode (393–7), the nostalgia for a life away from the Quirites can easily be read as a farewell to Seneca's old life at Nero's court.

The nexus between politics and tragedy can be explored more fruitfully by comparing Seneca's plays with his prose works to illuminate his political thought. Granted, topics traditionally belonging to the realm of the "political" (e.g., discussions of the different forms of government, critique of constitutions, analysis of foreign politics, etc.) are absent both in Seneca's tragedies and in his philosophical works, including the *de Clementia*. "Seneca says far more about the men than about the system," as Griffin points out. His political vision of the Empire cannot be separated from his moral vision of the princeps. However, tragic myths, typically revolving around questions of tyranny and power, granted Seneca the opportunity to enlarge on ethical and political issues. *Hercules Furens* offers one of the most significant examples. After returning from Hades, Theseus gives a speech in which he draws a distinction between the good king and the tyrant (HF 738–47). Although his words resonate with topics common in Hellenistic political discourse, the general framework is quite different. Theseus is sustained by a strong faith in divine justice. From his theological perspective not even the tyrant can escape divine punishment. The *Thyestes*, on the contrary, teaches us a lesson in *Realpolitik*. In the dialog between Atreus and his attendant (Thy. 203–335), we are told that the source of kingly power lies in deeds alone, a statement fully in tune with Roman practices of imperial power. This is to learn a lesson on *Realpolitik*, rather than simply seeing Atreus as Nero.

¹² Nisbet 2008.¹³ For this political reading, see Malaspina 2003.¹⁴ Griffin 1976: 210.

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From this view, a classification of the poetic material according to recurring political themes proves particularly useful. Such themes include: the relationship between monarchy and tyrannical power; alternatives to power; the role of fate in the kingdom; the function of attendants and advisors. These categories show that the tragedies, in spite of their traditional and mythological character, delve into the same questions of political ethics that Seneca addresses in his prosework. Each tragedy, moreover, tackles the subject in its own distinctive way. Thus, if we look at the tragic corpus in its entirety, we detect the same spectrum of approaches that we find in Seneca's philosophical writings. At one end of the spectrum we find the optimistic stance of *Hercules Furens*, characterized by a strong faith in the superior order, an approach resembling that of the *de Clementia*, Seneca's most significant reflection on power, and written when he was actively involved in imperial politics. At the opposite end of the spectrum we find a remarkably pessimistic stance toward supreme power in the *Thyestes*, where power and tyranny overlap, and seclusion from both politics and human society at large is regarded as the only viable option. The other six plays are situated between these two poles. Seen from this perspective, Seneca's tragedies provide some of the earliest and most complex reflections on the nature of the principate qua institution.

Last, the political contents of Seneca's tragedies have to be assessed from an aesthetic standpoint. The plays – and the *Thyestes* is particularly relevant here – could easily be regarded as reflections on the aesthetics of tyranny, revolving around the core theme of passions. Exceptional passions are not only the ethical hallmark of Seneca's "tyrant" characters; they are the source of their sublime "poetics" as well. Their crimes, constituting the *fabula* of the tragedies themselves, exceed anything tried before (*maius solito*). From this perspective, the words through which Atreus, Juno, and Medea express their furor are not just poetic, but rather poietic, constitutive of an aesthetic previously unexplored.

9.3 ... BACK TO AUGUSTUS

Taken this way, the *Thyestes* suggests a meta-theatrical connection between the (theatricalized) political power of tyranny and the demiurgic power of poetry. Though it is tempting to see this aestheticization of tyranny as an expression of political opposition, it is best taken as

¹⁵ Malaspina 2003: 300–1.

¹⁶ On the aesthetics of tyranny, see Schiesaro 2003.

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a version of the “Augustanism reconfigured” that characterizes Seneca’s theater and, more generally, the literary production of the Neronian age. In *Troades*, for example, large portions of Virgil’s epic discourse are fragmented into the body of the play. For his part, Seneca adopts a reversed teleological perspective, going backward from Rome to the destruction of Troy, thus exposing the contradictions of Virgil’s teleology. In the *Thyestes*, Fury speaks in the voice of the Virgilian *Allecto*, thus drawing on Virgil’s epic as the source of her tragic nefas. In *Medea*, the sublime character of the heroine’s boundless powers resonates with the depiction of the conquest of the world by the human race, which in turn appears as both the fulfillment and the demise of an Augustan imperial fantasy. At the end of *Phaedra* (1109–14), the messenger plays the role of an herald, proclaiming the death of the illustrious heir to the imperial throne in an official capacity. This speech leads the audience to meditate on the troubles of Julio-Claudian dynastic succession, starting from Augustus’ painful search for an heir.

Two further examples from the *Thyestes* show to what extent Neronian and Augustan readings sustain each other. The killing of *Thyestes*’ sons follows the patterns of a Dionysiac ritual. It is presented as a sacrifice in which *Atrous* is at once both executor and recipient. Already under Augustus, who was himself both *sacerdos* and *divus*, *Dionysus* was regarded as an attractive symbol of regenerative power. *Atrous* manipulates this symbol, exposing it to a range of diffracted and conflicting perspectives. His sacrifice stages the essence of imperial power as a form of ritualized violence. In this respect the sacrifice presupposes the new theomorphic image of the emperor that became popular during the first century CE. During the second half of his reign, Nero himself pushed his divine associations to new limits, leading to a change in the perception of the princeps in Rome.²¹

The second example involves the setting of the *Thyestes*. In designing it, Seneca acknowledges the foundational role of Augustan, and in particular Virgilian, poetry in defining how the space of power articulates itself within a set of fluid relationships, both topographic and symbolic, linking the city and the *palatium*. The description of the *Domus Pelopia* (Thy. 641–82) given by the messenger occupies a central position in the play, adding dramatic unity to the tragedy. The whole setting is structured in separate frames, just as the play itself. There is the

¹⁷ Littlewood, Chapter 5 in this volume.

¹⁸ Schiesaro 2003: 187–208.

75.

¹⁹ Cadario 2011 and Bergmann 2013 deal with this topic through an analysis of Nero’s different

See Littlewood, Chapter 5 in this volume.

²⁰ Degl’Innocenti Pierini 2008: 251–

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portraits types.

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palace (641–8), with its conspicuous and capacious throne room, big enough for the entire population; within the palace, we find a secret maze, symbolizing the tragic plot and inhabited by infernal presences. A sinister forest grows there, dominated by a gigantic oak and surrounded by a gloomy spring (649–79). Finally, the forest contains the cave where Atreus carries out his nefas (679 f.). This merger of a locus horridus (featuring abruptness and larger-than-life dimensions) with a Dionysian space (ominous natural revelations) follows a pattern found in contemporary landscape painting.

The cave at the heart of Atreus' inner palace raises questions about the use of Augustan poetry as a source of poetic inspiration. The multilayered structure of the Domus Pelopia is replete with Virgilian references: the infernal imagery from Aeneid 6, Latinus' palace (Aen. 7.170–91), the temple of Apollo (Aen. 6.9–13), Cacus' cave (Aen. 8.241–305). Such references invite the reader/viewer to see in the Domus Pelopia an image of Rome's imperial palace. It has also been hypothesized that the tragic palace hints at the future Domus Aurea. More to the point, however, are similarities between the Thyestes' gloomy palace and the structure of Nero's imperial villa in Subiaco. The villa was built on the shore of several artificial lakes created by damming the upper stream of the River Anio. The villa included a series of narrow wings, nestled between high cliffs and following the water's high differentials. The uppermost two-story wing, overlooking the River Anio, featured a gigantic recess, with its own apse, nestled between two large jutting structures, covered by a groined vault. On the lower level was a series of connected rooms, decorated by false doors and deep recesses.

The description of the Domus Pelopia might also hint at the Domus Transitoria, situated on the Palatine and constructed prior to the Domus Aurea. The Domus Transitoria seems to have featured the same spatial articulation on different levels as the Subiaco villa. On the grounds of the former Vigna Barberini, recent excavations have discovered a circular-shaped structure formed by a pillar, several fan-style arches, and a room that may have had a linchpin and a rotating mechanism. It is perhaps possible to identify this structure if not with the cenatio rotunda, Nero's rotating dining room traditionally located in a wing of the Domus Aurea on the Oppian Hill, at least with its precursor in the

²² Aygon 2004: 364–5. ²³ Schiesaro 2006: 441–9.

²⁴ Petrone 1986–7: 137f., Smolenaars 1998, Rosati 2002, Riemer 2007.

²⁵ Tarrant 1985: 183, *onv.* 642.

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Domus Transitoria.²⁶ In this case we would have a point of comparison, both symbolic and material, for one of the most striking images of the Thyestes; namely, Seneca's depiction of the world's end (virtually caused by the Thyesteia cena) as a swirling collapse of the constellations, each breaking away one by one from the celestial vault under the centrifugal force caused by the world's crazy spinning.

Here again, one must take into account the symbolic construction of the space of power through time, starting from the Augustan age. The text shows many clues pointing in this direction. First, the Fury orders Tantalus to decorate the gates of his palace with laurel garlands (Thy. 54–5), thus echoing a custom initiated under Augustus. Second, the many references to solar and circus imageries that characterize the Domus Pelopia (Thy. 123, 409–10, 659–62) are not exclusive to Nero, who reintroduced the “solar” conceptualizations of the Circus Maximus and of the Palatine that Augustus had promoted (see La Rocca, Chapter 13 in this volume). After 64 CE, Nero became ever more identified with the sun. The image of the celestial charioteer suggested links with Nero's own athletic pursuits. Whereas the Thyestes emphasizes the Neronian image of Sol as a charioteer, Medea (probably composed at the beginning of Nero's reign) purposely challenges that association: at the play's opening Medea asks to ride in her familial, solar chariot and set Corinth on fire (32ff.). But at the end of the play she is carried away into a sky devoid of gods by a chariot of serpents, chthonian creatures, possibly resonating with Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.²⁷ The chariot of the sun in which Euripides had her fly away has disappeared from the scene.

9.4 SPACE AND NARRATIVE

Seneca's scenic space can be viewed as an exemplary, condensed system of signs and symbols. On the stage, the space of Senecan tragedies is endowed with semantic significance and from the first act onward it

²⁶ Further excavations and researches are required to verify this interesting hypothesis, which has been formulated by Tomei 2011: 131 and Villedieu 2011.

²⁷ Monteleone 1991: 218. See, e.g., Aug. R.G. 34; Ov. fast. 4.953; met. 1.562–3; Mart. 8.1.1 laurigeros ... penates (for Domitian's palace).

²⁸ For the “Cirque du Soleil” and its relationship with the Palatium, see Barchiesi 2008.

²⁹ Cadario 2011: 176–7, 185–8 on Nero's loricata statue coming from the theater of Caere as well as the lost purple velarium, spread over the theater of Pompey during festivities for Tiridates' coronation ceremony in 66 CE.

³⁰ For resonances with Ovid and the poetic tradition in Seneca's tragedy, see Trinacty 2014: 124–6.

³¹ Segal 1986; Rosati 2002; Schmidt 2014: 539–41.

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congests the dramatic atmosphere, foreshadowing the final tragic disaster. Besides the *Thyestes*, *Phaedra* provides an excellent case in point. At the beginning of the play, Hippolytus praises the Attic woodlands surrounding Athens, and in so doing he directs the audience's attention to the offstage world. Such a move serves to offer an alternative to the stage-space, that is, to the palace. The prince himself leaves the palace in a hurry, as if he did not want to belong there. Hippolytus then exits the scene, and the stage is occupied by the overwhelming presence of *Phaedra*. Through her furor the woman defines the stage/palace as the source of the ill-omened fate that will destroy her stepson. The structuring of the relationship between stage and off-stage shows that the world of the prince and that of his stepmother are irreconcilable.

The characterization of dramatic figures by placement in their own particular landscapes has a counterpart in changes in contemporary wall painting (the Fourth Pompeian style) and in particular the revival of the model of the *scaenae frons*. On one hand, the Fourth style continues a well-established tradition: the *scaenae frons* already appears in late Republican and early imperial iconography, and its use is attested also in the Second style. On the other hand, the Fourth style innovates, reducing the dimensions of scenography in private contexts and populating the scenes with mythological figures. Such a difference perhaps reflects changes in the modes of consuming dramatic literature, resulting from a new emphasis placed on the text rather than on its public mass performance. Seneca's tragedies also testify to this new trend. In addition, one further conceptual change needs to be taken into account. The *scaenarum frontes* of the Second style, devoid as they are of any human presence, led to a theatricalization of domestic rituals by providing an ideal background for dramatizing the roles played by the people inhabiting the relevant private spaces. That is, these domestic scenes devoid of characters inevitably drawn in actual people to play domestic roles against the backdrops and become actors in the scenes. If, on the contrary, the painted scenes are already populated with characters, there is no theatricalization of the homeowner's "performance of domestic life." The frescoes decorating Neronian houses, featuring dramatic scenes complete with characters, can be read as shows offered by the hosts. In contrast to the Second style, the world of theater represents an alternative to the world of the *domus* and to everyday life, as spectators are cut off from the painted stage, which is now an autonomous and

³² On the model of the *scaenae frons*, see Leach 2004: 93–122 and Elsner 2004: 2 with further bibliography.

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exclusive space. Viewers are not invited to play their part, but rather to imagine the development of the *fabula* in their minds.

Finally, in the Fourth style, the proliferation of *scaenae frontes* creates the capacity for double illusion. In the way in which it opens narratives to the imagination and closes them to external access (engaged participation), the Fourth style *frons scaenae* establishes a sophisticated, yet quite ambiguous relationship between spatial organization and mythological contents, which bears some resemblances to the structure of Senecan tragedies as a whole. We may think here, for example, of the multiplication of various frameworks of action at different levels, and the winding relationship between the different levels of drama. Second, the function of the chorus in Senecan drama is no longer mimetic, but semantic, producing a *fabula altera*, i.e., an alternative to the staged plot, thus multiplying narrative perspectives. Third, imagination plays a major role. In all of the tragedies, regardless of how they were consumed, the stage is created by the words of the poet while the audience must use its imagination to visualize the scenes. Traditional messenger speeches thus become full-fledged scenes – another parallel with Neronian wall painting, which features a proliferation of autonomous scenes.

It has to be stressed that the analogy between Seneca's tragedies and the painted stages in contemporary wall painting does not involve Nero's imperial palaces, where the *scaenae frons* is present but devoid of human figures; as in the *Domus Transitoria*, where a series of rooms decorated with polychrome marbles was built around a fountain in the shape of a stage. In this case, the tyrant himself takes center stage.

9.5 COLORS AND ICONOGRAPHY

Senecan tragedies share several features with other masterpieces of the Neronian period – an eagerness “to be more than”; a high degree of rhetoricization in style and content; a language characterized by paradox and hyperbole; an emphasis on the word's ability to construct reality; and an emphasis on the body and its (political, poetic, cosmological, etc.) imagery. Several of these features lend themselves to a comparison with contemporary artistic tendencies, particularly with an overriding interest in grotesque narratives and baroque forms: gruesome details, red tones (especially blood-red and fire), stark contrasts between light

³³ Lorenz 2007: 676–7.

³⁴ Mazzoli 2014: 569–74.

³⁵ Varner 2000.

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and darkness, overemphatic gestures and bodily postures. Parallels between single scenes from Seneca's tragedies and contemporary paintings/reliefs have a long history in scholarship. But a comprehensive analysis of the relationship between the tragedies and Neronian art has yet to be written. In particular, a new model for an integrated reading of parallel iconographies is needed. One of the key issues here concerns the criteria by which artists or commissioners selected the scenes to be translated into images, in pictures that offered a "pregnant moment" that required viewers to complete the story in their own imaginations.

But in order to reach this integrated method of reading we must resist the temptation to determine "who came first?" Given the loss of so much Roman and Hellenistic literature, it is almost always impossible to establish whether Seneca builds on previous traditions or boldly invents. A fresco in Pompeii, for instance, shows blind Oedipus standing in front of Jocasta (R III 4.2), just as happens in Seneca (*Oed.* 998 ss.). For his part, Sophocles had Oedipus blind himself with the buckle of Jocasta, who has already hanged herself. A similar parallel is found in a wall painting from Palermo (H 1467) that has Oedipus meeting the messenger with Jocasta nowhere in sight. A fresco from the Domus Aurea (RPGR 209, 4) shows the same sequence of scenes that is followed in Seneca's *Phaedra*: Hippolytus off hunting, Hippolytus and the nurse discussing the nature of love, *Phaedra* love-sick. The parallel has led art historians to reinterpret the central scene, which had previously been read as the revelation of *Phaedra*'s love through the nurse (as Euripides has it). In Seneca, *Phaedra* reveals her love to Hippolytus directly, while the nurse is given a more "philosophical" role (*Phae.* 435–579). By way of the Senecan parallel, the central scene of the fresco becomes the pivotal part of a narrative that is framed as a sort of rhetorical debate for and against (*disputatio in utramque partem*), in which *Phaedra* (the choice of love) and Hippolytus (the choice of chastity) are contrasted as irreconcilable.

9.6 TRAGEDIES IN THEIR OWN TIME

Still to be addressed is the question of how Seneca's tragedies relate to other dramatic genres of the Neronian era. Sources testify to a rich and

³⁶ See, among others, Croisille 1982.

³⁷ As Varner 2000: 127 pointed out, in Senecan theater, such a "pregnant moment" demands strong viewer involvement in the events represented.

³⁸ The following examples are taken from Croisille 1982: 78–100, 162–86.

³⁹ Kelly 1979. See also Zanobi 2008.

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varied generic landscape, where the term “tragedy” could be taken to mean many things: *tragoedia cantata* was a short concert or “lyric” production; *tragoedia saltata*, a pantomime ballet; *citharoedia*, a solo performance consisting in a tragic aria accompanied by the lyre. Seneca’s plays, however, attest to the survival of full-length literary tragedy, in spite of the loss of professional playwrights and the extravagances of the late Republican stage. Rhetorical declamations played a major role in the persistence of tragedy. In this respect, literary tragedy stands starkly against other forms of contemporary mass spectacle that were characterized by a rather loose structure. However, Seneca’s tragedies are also affected by the generic enrichment that characterizes literary production in the Neronian era. For instance, the refined metrical structure of the choral parts – and of some monodies as well – points to a keen interest in musical component. Such an interest in turn reflects the proliferation of public musical performances during the Neronian age; performances directly promoted by the emperor through the creation of schools open to the public. Moreover, some specific features of Seneca’s tragedies are better read against the backdrop of pantomime: the “running commentaries,” for instance – that is, the detailed description of a character’s emotions, actions, or looks – introspective monologs and narrative set-pieces, as well as the extensive naming of body parts and facial expressions, all resonate strongly with pantomime. The connection is not surprising per se. Petronius’ *Satyricon* has distinctively mimic overtones, and according to ancient sources, Lucan too composed librettos for pantomime (*salticae fabulae*). Furthermore, the reading of the *Apocolocyntosis* as a Menippean reworking of a libretto that was originally written for a mime to be staged at Nero’s court fits this context very well.

Finally, we cannot rule out the hypothesis that Seneca’s tragedies were excerpted to become *tragoediae cantatae* or *citharoediae*, or that they were modified into *tragoediae saltatae* designed for a broader audience. Graffiti from Pompei featuring lines from Seneca’s tragedies seem to point in this direction.⁴⁶

This brings us back to the generically overlapping figures with which we began: Nero the cithara player, Piso the singing *tragoedus*, and Seneca the dramatist. Future research that aims to assess the role of

⁴⁰ On Nero’s artistic career, see, e.g., Edwards 1994; Champlin 2003: 69–108; Fantham 2013: 20–5 and Leigh, Chapter 1 in this volume.

⁴¹ On the fall and rise of Roman literary tragedy, see Goldberg 1996.

⁴² For Seneca’s competence as a musicologist in the Neronian milieu, see Wille 1967: 338–50; Luque-Moreno 1997: 44–49; Mazzoli 2014: 565–7.

⁴³ Fantham 1988: 9; 169. See also Zanobi 2008: 66–73.

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⁴⁶ Cugusi 2008: 59–62.

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Senecan tragedies in the Neronian age will look for new elements of cultural mediation in order to gain a sense of perspective as well as to highlight mutual interconnections. This is the only way to grasp the multidimensional character of the theatricality that stamps the Neronian age.

FURTHER READING

For a useful introduction to Neronian literary culture and the place of Seneca's plays in it, see Buckley and Dinter 2013 (especially 6–12). A convenient overview of current research on Senecan tragedy, dealing with single plays and their sources, language and style, topics, date, and reception is found in part 3 of Damschen and Heil 2014. Perceptive surveys on Senecan tragedy as a whole, placing it in its various contemporary contexts, include Liebermann 2014 and Trinacty 2014. On the role of Seneca in the political tradition of Roman tragedy, see also Davis 2015. Edwards 1994 should still be referred to on the role of acting as a central metaphor in the ancient representation of Nero as well as of his relationship with Seneca. An in-depth investigation of Senecan theatricality is offered by Littlewood 2015. Much research remains to be done in the area where Senecan tragedies and Neronian art could overlap: besides Croisille 1982 and Varner 2000, a comprehensive analysis of this relationship is still to be written. Newly opened perspectives on Fourth-style wall paintings (see La Rocca and Vout, Chapters 13 and 12, respectively, in this volume) may prove useful in revisiting this topic.