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PLAUTUS AND SENECA: ACTING IN NERO'S ROME

By M. D. GRANT

Anyone who has ever read the tragedies of Seneca must have wondered at the intention of the author. In the absence of any external evidence for their staging this is not surprising. W. Beare¹ argues for declamation before a select audience who would have appreciated the sparkle of the rhetoric. G. E. Duckworth,² whilst stressing that presentation on stage cannot be proved, suggests tentatively that they were at least written with an eye to performance. C. D. N. Costa³ holds out for solo virtuoso recitals, with perhaps extracts or a few scenes being performed. F. Ahl⁴ recalls the emperor Domitian's enactment forbidding plays to be presented anywhere except indoors, and thus the large houses of the aristocracy may have been home to tragic theatre. V. Sørensen⁵ feels that a public performance of Seneca's tragedies would have been a notable public occasion, and with his ample means to fund such events, Seneca may have been trying to entice a large audience towards the benefits of Stoic philosophy.

If a writer decides to compose a play, then it is almost certain that current dramatic conventions will be followed, although today the avant-garde and the progressive are applauded. That play does not necessarily have to be performed, as can be seen from the dramas composed purely for the study from the close of the fifth century B.C. onwards.⁶ These conventions can be derived from a textbook, from private reading, and from attending performances. The most obvious Roman textbook is the *Art of Poetry* by Horace, but as Pratt argues,⁷ there is little connection between the poet's version of Hellenistic literary theory and what Seneca chose to do as a dramatist. Private reading might have ensured a greater correspondence between the tragedy of Classical Athens and Seneca's plays, yet the differences far outweigh the similarities.⁸ There remains the inspiration from seeing other plays on stage.

It is true that no complete tragedy survives from the Hellenistic, Republican, and Augustan periods.⁹ Yet plays were written and performed: for example, the tragedy by Lucius Varius Rufus at the games celebrating the battle of Actium and the *Fire* by Afranius presented at a

festival held by the emperor Nero. What is impossible to say for certain is whether these were proper productions or merely declamations, although the way the sources are phrased suggests the former. This impasse has led to the suggestion that Seneca's dramatic technique is postclassical and stems from Augustan tragedy.¹⁰ However, this is not, I think, a satisfying solution as it hinges on clues that are at best shadowy and incomplete.

When watching or directing productions of Seneca, I have been struck by a link that at first sight seemed impossible, but on reflection appeared rather more plausible. There is strong literary evidence for the performance of comedies in the imperial age.¹¹ Quintilian refers to the performances of old comedies in the theatres of his day.¹² Even more telling is his quoting from Terence to illustrate a point he has made about the contemporary comic actors Demetrius and Stratocles. Pliny describes his slave Zosimus as a *comoedus*.¹³ Although this is usually taken to mean just 'actor', it could translate very nicely as 'comic actor': pleasurable distraction from the strains of public life would have accorded well with contemporary medical advice, and a man of Pliny's literary taste would have enjoyed the finely honed Latin of Terence or the pointed interplay of Plautus. Even if tragedy, as is generally assumed,¹⁴ was no longer an important outlet for poetic or political statements, yet the construction of theatres and the depiction of the accoutrements of the green room on wall paintings point to a fascination with drama in the houses of the influential.¹⁵

I would like to examine this perceived connection between Plautus and Seneca in terms of dramatic conventions. Plautus often has a character addressing the audience either without realizing that another character is listening nearby, or as an aside without any thought of a response from the character that is participating in the conversation at that moment. Both situations elicit superb comedy if handled sharply. For example, Megadorus delivers a lengthy speech of fifty-seven lines (*Aul.* 475–536) on the profligate ways of women, interspersed by comments from Euclio, although these comments are heard only by the audience and not by Megadorus himself; and Megadorus professes not to have heard various comments about the rapaciousness of the wealthy in his discussion with Euclio over a possible marriage with his daughter (*Aul.* 178–284). The same device is used by Seneca: for example, in *Phaedra* (580–2) the nurse speaks to the audience, but it is obvious that Hippolytus is on stage at this point, although he is not being addressed; similarly *Phaedra* makes a statement to the audience

(583–8) both while seemingly in a faint and with Hippolytus holding her in his arms. In *Thyestes* (491–507) Plisthenes and Thyestes are on stage, but they do not respond to the presence of Atreus until 508, and then only when Atreus goes up to embrace his brother. Plisthenes does not talk after 490, yet he must be on stage as lines 523–4 reveal. These situations heighten the tension, lending to laughter in comedy and anticipation in tragedy. On stage they feel no more awkward than the asides in opera; they do not trouble a modern audience and there is no reason to suppose that they would do the same for a Roman audience.

The restricted and somewhat abstract nature of the characters has been noted.¹⁶ That these characters are ciphers – the king, the nurse, the wife, the son, the dutiful chorus of acolytes – may be derived from the schools of rhetoric,¹⁷ but it also points firmly towards a feature of Roman comedy, namely the depiction of stock characters. Although the audience will have a character labelled at first sight, yet there is nothing intrinsically regimented about this tradition: the old man Euclio in *Aulularia* is far removed from the old man Simo in *Pseudolus*. Similarly, despite the generally derogatory remarks about Seneca's characterization,¹⁸ credit is given to at least some variations: for example, M. Frank¹⁹ focuses on the arguments in Seneca's *Phoenissae*, suggesting that Antigone uses altruistic, moral arguments, whilst Eteocles is entirely self-centred. There is a political background to what Seneca was doing, just as there was for Plautus. Under a repressive regime playwrights are on relatively safe ground when using stock characters. Even the Republic did not take kindly to free speech, as Naevius found to his cost at the close of the third century B.C.; Nero's Rome was much more repressive, any suggestion of independent thought bringing a charge of treason closer. The aristocracy of the first century A.D. had to mask its feelings and pretend to enjoy what it hated. With the eyes of the emperor and his servants on the watch for deviant behaviour, the spectators were now the spectated, as Seneca suggests in *Thyestes*.²⁰ Plautus revels in his *double entendres*, the adage that smut is in the mind of the listener shielding him from any accusations of corruption; Tacitus, on the other hand, is a master of *distinctio* or doublespeak, for criticism of an earlier emperor could render praise for the current emperor hypocritical.²¹ This reversed view of life can be seen in the literary longing of Maternus for the peace of the countryside, and his everyday life in the bustle of the city (Tac. *Dial.* 12.1–13.1). Seneca too yearns for the countryside and its implied simplicity (e.g., *Phaed.* 501–17), but he lives in the fevered heart of the Empire. A stock character can therefore be taken in whatever way a

spectator or reader wishes. However unpleasantly Atreus might act in *Thyestes*, and however toadying his minister might be, the safeguard for the writer is surely that here is the stock character of a king, a pantomime king almost, not a personification of anyone living.²² Even the setting is Greek, not Roman, again an invaluable device for deflecting criticism.

A modern audience finds the speeches in Seneca far too long and meandering. Much has been written about the rhetorical element of the speeches, a feature that is hardly surprising given the great attention this was given in Roman education. Agamemnon's speech in the *Satyricon* (1–5) is an amusing witness to this, whatever its overall purpose in the novel. But it is not constructive to blame Seneca for the tendency, because his audience presumably demanded it. Even Pliny's *Natural History* is steeped in this rhetorical tradition, stones and metals being melded into a great diatribe against the abuse of nature.²³ However, I believe that there is another element at work here. In comedy there are long monologues, such as the one by Megadorus that has already been discussed (*Aul.* 475–536). Admittedly this is interrupted by Euclio, but its effect on stage is of an interlude studded with rhetorical devices from alliteration to assonance and hyperbole. There is no development of the plot, merely the conceits of a stock wealthy character. Transpose the concept to tragedy, allow for a much greater fascination with rhetoric, and the speeches of Seneca are formed. This progression then sees Seneca as a dramatist writing within a formal tradition, rather than a novice who clumsily garbles the texts of the Classical Greek tragedians.

Continuity and motivation are often lacking in Seneca's plays,²⁴ yet the same can be said of Plautus too. Take the *Aulularia*, for example: why does Megadorus suddenly change his mind about marriage, given his vehement protestations just a few lines before, and how is it that Euclio fails to notice his daughter's pregnancy, when everything else in his house is so closely observed? In fact this constant jarring of dramatic illusion was a feature that many scholars once used to castigate Plautus, although now it is rightly held to be a vital source of comedy.²⁵ Greek tragedy, as it survives, flows logically towards its dénouement; there is no question that the action in Sophocles' *Antigone* or *King Oedipus* is anything but real and vivid. Seneca's tragedies, on the other hand, are nightmarish, where the action is warped and twisted. In my own productions I have played on this idea, emphasizing the jolts of weird coincidence and refutation that bring down the characters. Some of this can be ascribed to the two cultures, Classical Athens guided by the sure pace of fate and the clarity of contemporary philosophical debate, first

century A.D. Rome checked by the hand of an autocratic and capricious ruler who could summarily order executions. In Seneca's *Hercules Furens* Hercules is reported as emerging from the underworld at lines 520–2, although Juno declared at lines 58 and following that he had already returned to Greece.²⁶ In *Medea* the nurse gives a detailed account of Medea's movements, although the audience would have been able to see Medea moving themselves.²⁷ Beacham states for Plautus what must surely apply to Seneca too: that this is self-conscious theatre with spectators and performers both inside and outside the world of the play.²⁸ Thus in an Atellan farce, one of the key influences on Plautus, a comic actor could direct the last line – 'Hell guides your feet' – to the senators whom Nero intended to murder,²⁹ just as the ghost of Tantalus in Seneca's *Thyestes* (74–5) could have addressed his line 'You damned out there' to an audience or at least to his readers. The dramatic illusion is snapped by both playwrights, one to make the audience laugh, the other to enfold the spectators or readers in the tragedy of the play and of their times.

The final idea that I would like to examine is horror. Watch Euripides' *Hecabe* or Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, and the horror is palpable and pathetic; watch Seneca's *Phaedra* or *Oedipus*, and something else is definitely at work that is not Greek. There is a cruel and violent streak in Plautus which may be connected with the gladiatorial games.³⁰ However, it is a very human failing to laugh at the misfortunes of others, a point explored by all great comedians, from the old joke of pulling a chair from under someone who is about to sit down to the physical violence inflicted on an innocent-looking stooge. The episode of the wax ears and nose in the *Golden Ass* (2.31) of Apuleius shows this theme in an ancient literary context. Furthermore, F. Ahl suggests that laughter can enhance our sense of horror.³¹ The closing scene of *Phaedra* (1245 ff.) cannot help but elicit a laugh, for the details are too grotesque and the tension after the momentous messenger speech too taut to allow for any other display of emotion. Seneca writes elsewhere that public executions educated through their force of deterrence.³² In *Phaedra* I think he is testing our reactions, to question our assumptions about human nature, just as Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author* finds humour in what is essentially a desperately tragic account of family betrayal. Plutarch lends support to this claim when he suggests that an audience will find pleasure in seeing actors depict pain.³³ There is not such a divide between pleasure and laughter.

It will probably never be known for certain whether Seneca's plays

were acted on stage in first century A.D. Rome. The plays can today be successfully acted and win an appreciative audience, despite their rhetoric and complex mythological allusions, although this proves nothing about their Roman setting, as the scholarly debate outlined earlier shows. What can be argued is that the plays are products of their time, carefully written according to contemporary conventions. Just as in Plautus, there are Roman anachronisms that appear in their otherwise Greek settings, for instance in the *Phoenissae* some Parthian arrows (428) and a triumph (578). There may be some hints in the language too: *faxo*, the archaic future of *facio*, is common in Plautus and makes a rare later appearance in Seneca's *Medea*.³⁴ Yet it is on the stage (or perhaps from familiar reading) that the similarities really become apparent, and so make a claim for the genuine originality of Roman drama, both comic and tragic.

NOTES

1. 'Plautus, Terence and Seneca: a comparison of aims and methods' in M. J. Anderson (ed.), *Classical Drama and its Influence* (London, 1965), 111.
2. *The Nature of Roman Comedy: a Study in Popular Entertainment*, 2nd edn. (Bristol, 1994), 71.
3. *Seneca, Medea* (Oxford, 1973), 3.
4. *Seneca, Medea*, translated and with an introduction (Ithaca, 1986), 27.
5. *Seneca: the Humanist at the Court of Nero* (Edinburgh, 1984), 284.
6. N. T. Pratt, *Seneca's Drama* (Chapel Hill, 1983), 20.
7. Op. cit., 17.
8. Pratt, op. cit., 22–4 and J. G. Fitch (ed.), *Seneca, Hercules Furens* (Ithaca, 1987), 44.
9. R. J. Tarrant (ed.), *Seneca, Agamemnon* (Cambridge, 1976), 7.
10. Fitch, op. cit., 46–9.
11. W. Beare, op. cit., 111 and G. E. Duckworth, op. cit., 70.
12. *Inst.* 10.1.99, 11.3.178–82.
13. *Ep.* 5.19.3.
14. F. Ahl, op. cit., 13.
15. D. and E. Henry, *The Mask of Power: Seneca's Tragedies and Imperial Rome* (Warminster, 1985), 7.
16. Pratt, op. cit., 150 and M. Frank (ed.), *Seneca, Phoenissae* (Leiden, 1995), 34.
17. C. D. N. Costa, op. cit., 6.
18. Costa, op. cit., 5 and Pratt, op. cit., 150.
19. Op. cit., 34.
20. S. Bartsch, *Actors in the Audience: Theatricality and Doublespeak from Nero to Hadrian* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1994), 3.
21. Bartsch, op. cit., 125–47, 181.
22. Cf. Pratt, op. cit., 150.
23. A. Wallace-Hadrill, 'Pliny the Elder and Man's Unnatural History', *G&R* 37 (1990), 80–6.
24. Costa, op. cit., 5–6, Tarrant, op. cit., 15–18, Fitch, op. cit., 45.
25. R. C. Beacham, *The Roman Theatre and its Audience* (London, 1991), 32–5.
26. Fitch, op. cit., 45.
27. Costa, op. cit., 108.
28. Beacham, op. cit., 35.
29. Beacham, op. cit., 149.
30. Beacham, op. cit., 31.

31. Ahl, *op. cit.*, 30. An excellent detailed discussion on a specialized aspect of the potential cruelty of comedy can be found in R. Garland, 'The Mockery of the Deformed and Disabled in Graeco-Roman Culture' in S. Jäkel and A. Timonen (edd.), *Laughter Down the Centuries*, vol. 1 (Turku, 1994), 71–84.

32. *Cl.* 1.22.1.

33. *Mor.* 673c–4c.

34. Costa, *op. cit.*, 152.

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