

## SENECA'S VISIONARY DRAMA

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...ut iura abdita  
et operta terris liceat impune eloqui.  
SENECA, *Hercules Furens* 660-661

credite me vobis folium recitare Sibyllae.  
JUVENAL, *Satire* 8.126

In his chapter on «The Grotesque,» E. E. Kellett pauses to comment:

That taste which finds pleasure in incongruity – in violation of the recognised conventions of art – is one of the few tastes of which, so far as I know, little or no trace is to be found among the ancients.<sup>1</sup>

Doubtless we have often heard so-called «classic» art defined as being almost wholly constituted by the peaceful, the orderly, the harmonious, the decorous, and the symmetrical. But for us to expect that some fifteen-hundred years of Greco-Roman art is all-of-a-piece would be far, far too naive. There simply never *was* any consistent «classical» style. Homer, Euripides, Plato, Diogenes, Theocritus, Horace, Ovid, and Lucian are all wonderfully capable of creating incongruous scenes – and of directly violating so-called artistic conventions. If the ancients gave us the concept of decorum, they also explored vast stretches of indecorum, and did it with

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<sup>1</sup> *Fashion in Literature: A Study of Changing Taste* (London 1931), p. 215.

considerable relish.<sup>2</sup> When Horace so piquantly describes the portrayal of a woman turning into a fish before our eyes,

Humano capiti cervicem pictor equinam  
iungere si velit, et varius inducere plumas  
undique collatis membris, ut turpiter atrum  
desinat in piscem mulier formosa superne,

(If a painter wishes to join a horse's neck to a human head and to place varied plumage on limbs brought together helter-skelter so that a woman beautiful in her upper parts should terminate hideously in a black fish,)

he claims to be depicting what is laughably «a sick man's dreams.»<sup>3</sup> But such «monsters» – mermaids as a matter of fact – are a commonplace upon the classical scene. The very building blocks of classical culture include the animal-headed deities of Egyptian religion and the wonderfully imaginative Grecian creatures like the triple-headed Cerberus or the renowned Sphinx. Most typical in Greek mythology are those half-human, half-bestial creatures who exemplify man's ambivalence about himself – the Centaur, the satyr, and the faun. Nor should we neglect to consider Vergil's Scylla,

Prima hominis facies et pulchro pectore virgo  
Pube tenus, postrema inmani corpore pistrix  
Delphinum caudas utero comissa luporum.<sup>4</sup>

(Above, her face is human, with beautiful breast – a maiden down to her waist; below, she is a monster, huge in body, – with tails of dolphins joined to a belly of wolves.)

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<sup>2</sup> We should remind Mr. Kellett that it was the ancients, by means of the influential paintings decorating Nero's Golden House, that gave the Renaissance the very concept of the «grotesque.» All in all, the ancients were quite gamesome and creative: consider parody (e.g. the *Batrachomyomachia*), Old Comedy, the satyr play, Cynic genres (diatribe, Menippea), *chreia*, the mock encomium, the epigram, the idyll, and the mime. All of these literary kinds look favorably upon disruption and distortion. Mikhail Bakhtin finds parody, travesty, and the farcical important in every era of the ancient Greco-Roman period. As for the Romans: «The literary and artistic conscience of the Romans could not imagine a serious form without its comic equivalent,» *The Dialogic Imagination*, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin, Texas 1981), p. 58; see all of the Section, «From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse,» pp. 41-83.

<sup>3</sup> *Ars Poetica* 1-4, 8.

<sup>4</sup> *Aeneid* 3.426-28.

When Vergil chose to employ such creatures, they were bound to be in vogue.

But critics like Kellett existed in both ancient *and* modern times. When they detected any touches of «unclassical» activity, they were bound to let the artists hear about it. Lucian reports a court-case made against him by the chaste and prim Dialogue; he protests like a damsel in distress that Lucian's unseemly art has harassed and disfigured the delicate «form» of dialogue:

... he dragged me down when I was already soaring above the zenith and mounting on 'heaven's back,'<sup>5</sup> and broke my wings, putting me on the same level as the common herd. Moreover, he took away from me the respectable tragic mask that I had, and put another upon me that is comic, satyr-like, and almost ridiculous. Then he unceremoniously penned me up with Jest and Satire and Cynicism... and Aristophanes, terrible men for mocking all that is holy and scoffing at all that is right...

Have I not been dreadfully maltreated, when I no longer occupy my proper rôle but play the comedian and the buffoon and act out extraordinary plots for him? What is most monstrous of all, I have been turned into a surprising blend, for I am neither afoot nor ahorseback, neither prose nor verse, but seem to my hearers a strange phenomenon made up of different elements, like a [Hippo]Centaur.<sup>6</sup>

Needless to say, this dread Hippocentaur is but another Classical monster. (We might add that Dialogue could have made similar complaints against Plato himself.) Kellett notwithstanding, such creatures as the Hippocentaur – the very essence of what we designate as exemplary of the «grotesque» – abound in ancient literature and art.

Perhaps Lucius Annaeus Seneca has suffered more than any other ancient figure for utilizing monstrosities and grotesqueries in all of his plays. He has been considered unClassical, inartistic, morbid, abominable, and mentally unbalanced for creating the kind of drama that he does. Only very recently have critics commenced to put aside the habit of treating him as a tasteless aberration or a pathetically incompetent imitator of the Greek tragic tradition, and instead attempted to accept his plays and to accurately describe them for what they are. One sensitive critic early on wrote lucidly about Seneca's fascination with pain and excruciating

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<sup>5</sup> See Plato, *Phaedrus* 247B.

<sup>6</sup> «*Bis accusatus*» (The Double Indictment), in *Lucian with an English Translation*, trans. A. M. Harmon (Cambridge, Mass. 1947), III, 147.

suffering in the plays,<sup>7</sup> and another has written well about Seneca's plots and their deliberately-crafted tendency to end in explosive violence.<sup>8</sup> Still more recently, critics have sought to associate Senecan practice with other and later traditions (associated with the Renaissance) – mannerism, the baroque, the grotesque.<sup>9</sup> All of this criticism has served a most useful purpose, for it has attempted to comprehend and to outline and explain the inner workings of Seneca's dramatic art. Such criticism has broken with the older, established practice of condemning Seneca's plays for not exactly replicating the earlier Greek dramatic tradition.

Yet, as we have already indicated, artists throughout the classical period had altered or even openly broken with earlier tradition. Even within one or two generations, the dramas of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides are strikingly unlike. And the highly experimental and evolving dramas of Euripides certainly offered a pattern and established a trend that Seneca found influential and attractive.

But that surely did not prevent Seneca from pushing on beyond Euripides and from creating a species of tragic drama that is uniquely his own. Indeed, «pushing on» is an accurate phrase for describing Senecan usage, for the playwright utilized extreme exaggeration, extending techniques to their uttermost. Seneca would have very well understood Ionesco's dictum in the twentieth century:

The essence of... theatre [lies] in magnifying... effects... farce, the extreme exaggeration of parody... back to the unendurable. Everything raised to paroxysm, where the source of tragedy lies. A theatre of violence...<sup>10</sup>

It is this propensity in Seneca toward extremism in the theatre that we would like to consider more closely in this essay. The recent terms applied to his art, «mannerism,» or «Baroque,» though valid, nonetheless give the impression of anachronism. Mr. Kellett aside, there has always been in the

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<sup>7</sup> Consult Otto Regenbogen, *Schmerz und Tod in den Tragödien Senecas* [1927] (Darmstadt 1963).

<sup>8</sup> See C. J. Herington, «Senecan Tragedy,» *Arion* 5 (1966) 422-71.

<sup>9</sup> See Jo-Ann Shelton, «Seneca's *Medea* as Mannerist Literature,» *Poetica* 11 (1979) 38-82; Charles Segal, «Senecan Baroque: The Death of Hippolytus in Seneca, Ovid, and Euripides,» *TAPhA* 114 (1984) 311-25; and Anna Lydia Motto and John R. Clark, «'There's Something Wrong With the Sun': Seneca's *Oedipus* and the Modern Grotesque,» *CB* 54 (1978) 41-44, and «Grotesquerie Ancient and Modern: Seneca and Ted Hughes,» *CML* 5 (1984) 13-22.

<sup>10</sup> Engène Ionesco, «Experience of the Theatre,» *Notes and Counter Notes*, trans. Donald Watson (New York 1964), p. 26.

art of every period a romantic trend as well as a classical one. Some artists have intrinsically been experimental, nightmarish, creatively extravagant.

Carl Jung has described these two traditions in different terms. He proposes that there are two broad modes of artistic or poetic creation, the «psychological» and the «visionary.» The psychological mode presents the stuff of everyday life, material readily available to human consciousness, and dealing with «the vivid foreground of life.» The visionary mode, Jung maintains, is its opposite; for the visionary

... reverses all the conditions of the former. [Its] material... is no longer familiar. It is a strange something that derives its existence from the hinterland of man's mind – that suggests the abyss of time... or evokes a super-human world of contrasting light and darkness. It is a primordial experience which surpasses man's understanding... it is foreign and cold, many-sided, demonic and grotesque. A grimly ridiculous sample of the eternal chaos ... it bursts assunder our human standards of value and of aesthetic form ..., [presenting a] disturbing vision of monstrous and meaningless happenings...<sup>11</sup>

Jung's «visionary» mode is strikingly apropos when we come to consider the dominant features of Senecan tragedy:<sup>12</sup>

PLOT. Each play presents a tale of foreboding action, whose plot moves steadily and irrevocably toward a finale of explosive violence. The action itself seems mechanical, almost a parody of conventional tragic action. Senecan plays thus more nearly resemble Shakespeare's savage *Troilus and Cressida* than the dramas of his Greek forebears.

CHARACTERIZATION. Characters are largely two-dimensional and monolithic, almost hounded by an *idée fixe* in all that they say and do. Characters are distinctly worse than we are – thus breaking with the heroic tradition of the mythic past. These characters are guilt-ridden, flawed, histrionic, self-conscious, and on the verge of extreme mental disorder. They give us protracted insight into a disturbed mentality – reminiscent of the view we get of the neurotic protagonist in Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground*.

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<sup>11</sup> C. G. Jung, *Modern Man in Search of a Soul*, trans. W. S. Dell and Cary F. Baynes (New York, n.d.), pp. 156-57.

<sup>12</sup> We have analyzed each play at length and discussed Seneca's overall dramatic artistry elsewhere; see our *Senecan Tragedy* (Amsterdam 1988).

SCENE. Fragmentation of time sequences is common, as Jo-Ann Shelton has observed.<sup>13</sup> Scenes are piled up one-by-one in loose, impressionistic, and staccato sequence. This nervous, disjunct compositional proceeding is reminiscent of the form used to create nightmarish milieu in visionary works like Georg Büchner's *Woyzeck*, Eliot's *Waste Land*, and Nathanael West's *Miss Lonely-hearts*.

MOOD. Characters are generally depressed, filled with foreboding and anticipation of the ominous and the terrible. Characters including the Chorus undergo violent mood-swings, from happiness to terror, from confidence to incertitude.

ATMOSPHERE. The setting is pervasively gloomy, Nephidian, often other-worldly or unearthly. The scene is usually dark, the air filled with evil omens, sinister signs, and premonitions, with haruspices, seers, and ghosts. Compare Seneca's atmosphere with the gloomy settings in Charlotte Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* or Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice*.

PSYCHIC SCENERY. The overall psychic terrain suggests what Jung terms «the hinterland of man's mind»: spirits, furies, monsters, witches, dreams, hysteria, and madness. Virtually every Senecan drama presents an intensified realm of growing distraction and frenzy.

IMAGERY. Throughout these dramas, there is a pervasive religious imagery that haunts the play, where deities give dire marks and signals of their disapproval – the world at times being plunged into an awful darkness-at-noon. Yet the audience simultaneously senses the death of the gods entirely, or at best their complete inability to interfere with or to prevent the dreadful deeds taking place upon the stage. Justice seems to be fully in abeyance and terminally ill.

THE UNNATURAL. The effect of all the plays' settings is best suggestive of the unnatural. Everywhere the gods give signs and warnings, but they are ultimately paralyzed and inchoate, that is, when they do not openly appear to favor revenge, slaughter, and sacrifice. Almost helplessly, characters and events are all swept toward a culminating and pervasive evil that cannot be forestalled.

Choruses in these plays are almost surrealistic in their anticipation and dread. The Chorus in the *Thyestes* tries to reflect upon the power and majesty of Love, but helplessly slides into more fearful topics.

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<sup>13</sup> «Problems of Time in Seneca's *Hercules Furens* and *Thyestes*,» *CSCA* 8 (1975) 257-69.

res deus nostras celeri citatas  
turbine versat.<sup>14</sup>

(God turns our rapid affairs  
in a swift whirl.)

The Fates seem to be accelerated, and all human affairs appear to be caught up in a dreadful «whirlwind.» The Chorus in the *Hercules Furens* has an even more night-marish vision of the nature of the world.

properat cursu  
vita citato volucrique die  
rota praecipitis vertitur anni;  
durae peragunt pensa sorores  
nec sua retro fila revolvunt.  
at gens hominum flatur rapidis  
obvia fati incerta sui:  
Stygias ultro quaerimus undas.<sup>15</sup>

(Life hurries by in its rapid course and in the swift day the wheel of the year that rushes headlong is turned; the harsh sisters accomplish their day's work, nor do they spin backwards the threads of life. But the race of men uncertain of its affairs is blown to meet the rapid fates; we seek the Stygian waves of our own accord.)

For them, human life speeds along with such terrible haste that every human's step is but the nearer approach to death. Like a ship upon the sea, these men sail into a Charybdis. It all transpires with such rapidity that it appears to the Chorus that all men deliberately aspire hastily to die, to ferry upon the river Styx.

Surely these are hallucinatory, distorted, and feverish readings of the human situation. Seneca's characters are almost permanently captured in a state of agitation and fearful trance. In an essay upon T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*, Lloyd Frankenberg claims that the poet is capable of employing no less than four poetic «voices» – the dry Expository or Didactic Voice, the Lyric Voice, the Narrative Voice, and, lastly, the Apocalyptic Voice; this latter being incantatory, unearthly, religious, and prophetic.<sup>16</sup> We would assuredly like to assert that Seneca relies most fully in his plays upon this last, Apocalyptic Voice. Throughout these dramas, his nervous,

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<sup>14</sup> *Thyestes* 621-22.

<sup>15</sup> *Hercules Furens* 178-85.

<sup>16</sup> *Pleasure Dome: On Reading Modern Poetry* (Boston 1949), pp. 97 ff.

desperate characters persistently invoke spirit, and resort to supplication and vision in an attempt, paradoxically, to cope with a world that is devoid of spirituality. Vice and folly appear to prevail.

It need hardly be argued that, in deploying all these practices, Seneca the dramatist is attempting to be almost anything but «classical» in the traditional sense of that word. As Charles Segal remarks about his techniques:

He does not aim at the linear clarity of classical narration, but at a sharp and rapid counterpoint of strikingly individual and sometimes overlapping details. He relies not on symmetry but on a doubling or tripling of motifs in spirals of increasing violence and intensity. His style... does not attempt to reproduce the well-proportioned grace and harmony of his 'classical' predecessors, but creates its own heavier, «baroque» effects of overwhelming massiveness, agitated and decentered movement, disorienting vastness, and emotional turbulence.<sup>17</sup>

Over all, «visionary» is a very suitable term for this species of theatre, for Seneca's theatre. His plays highlight a cosmology, as Rosenmeyer stresses, of cataclysm – a world beset by instability, deterioration, and malfunction.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, these plays – although transpiring in a setting from which gods and divine order and justice have, like *Astraea*, withdrawn – nevertheless give the eerie impression that they imitate an oracular seizure followed by a parody of religious sacrifice. Characters like *Cassandra*, *Hecuba*, *Oedipus*, *Thyestes*, *Agamemnon*, constantly anticipate and predict the advent of horrors, and thereafter directly follows grotesque blood sacrifices of innocent victims – *Oedipus*, the children of *Thyestes*, the children of *Medea*, *Hippolytus*, *Astyanax*, *Polyxena*, and *Hercules*. These so-called religious acts are the more terrible for being heinous, cruel, and sacrilegious – gross mimicries of devout spiritual rites. Hence the reader is given the disturbing and disorienting sense of witnessing religious scruples and pieties in a godless world.

Indeed, here is precisely the root and source of Seneca's dramatic power. For his dramas enact bifurcation at the very center of their actions: unheroic, feeble, and evil men retrace the steps of traditional heroes in the myths; ungodly men scrupulously perform religious ceremonies; and tragic dramas in the long Greco-Roman tradition are fragmented, debased, and emptied of their original meaning.

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<sup>17</sup> Segal (above, n. 9), p. 325.

<sup>18</sup> Thomas G. Rosenmeyer, *Senecan Drama and Stoic Cosmology* (Berkeley and Los Angeles 1989).



Because of the malaise that has been generally perceived in our own bloodthirsty century, the modern era has responded by proliferating a host of dark, «visionary» masterpieces: the novels of Faulkner, Céline, Marquez, Pynchon, and Grass, the short fiction of Kafka, the dramas of Beckett, Ionesco, and Pinter, the poetry of Eliot, Cavafy, Machado, Berryman, and Mandelstam. For this very reason, we should be all too well-acquainted with this powerful, satanic tradition. We should also, therefore, be ready and willing to accept the visionary dramas of Lucius Annaeus Seneca and to welcome him into this grim fold.