Ramus 46 (1&2) p.197–204 © Aureal Publications 2018.
doi:10.1017/rmu.2017.10

SENECAN POSTSCRIPT

A.J. Boyle

> In the plays of Seneca, the drama is all in the word, and the word has no further reality behind it.
>
> T. S. Eliot, 'Introduction' to Thomas Newton, *Seneca His Tenne Tragedies* (1927)

Eliot was always right to a degree, banally so. Much of the visceral, emotional and intellectual force of Senecan tragedy, like that of the great Elizabethan and Jacobean dramatists whom Seneca inspired, is *necessarily* verbal. But, as Trinacty's closural analysis and the other studies of this volume attest, there are 'further realities'—many and diverse: poetic, theatrical, political, rhetorical, psychological, moral, cultural—'behind' the language itself. This collection of critical essays is the latest manifestation of the resurgence of Senecan scholarly and intellectual energy which has taken place in the thirty plus years since the 1983 publication of the *Ramus* volume on *Seneca Tragicus*. That volume not only displayed with disdain the above quotation from Eliot, but paraded itself lamentably as 'the first collection of critical essays devoted specifically to Senecan tragedy to be published in English'.

Those days of lamentation are no more. In the last three decades we have witnessed a veritable cornucopia of new texts, new translations, new monographs, new critical studies, which have transformed the Senecan intellectual landscape. I mention particularly the appearance of the Oxford Classical Text of Zwierlein (1986a), the Mondadori text and translation of Viansino (Rome, 1993), the Budé edition of Chaumartin (Paris, 1999), the Loeb edition and translation of Fitch (Cambridge MA & London, 2002-04), the new text of Giardina (Pisa & Rome, 2007/2009)—and the recent English translations of Wilson (2010), Smith (2011) and Bartsch *et al.* (2017). Large-scale commentaries on individual Senecan tragedies have proved foundational. Before 1983 we had Tarrant on *Agamemnon* (Cambridge, 1976) and Fantham on *Troades* (Princeton, 1982); since that date, we have Tarrant on *Thyestes* (Atlanta, 1985), Fitch on *Hercules Furens* (Ithaca, 1987), Töchterle on *Oedipus* (Heidelberg, 1994), Frank on *Phoenissae* (Leiden, 1995a), Billerbeck on *Hercules Furens* (Leiden, 1999), Keulen on *Troades* (Leiden, 2001), Ferri on *Octavia* (Cambridge 2003), and Boyle on *Octavia* (Oxford, 2008), *Oedipus* (Oxford 2011), *Medea* (Oxford 2014) and *Thyestes* (Oxford 2017). Important smaller-scale editions and commentaries, too, have appeared, in several languages (especially English, Italian and German), often in formats designed (in part) for the non-classical literary scholar.

https://doi.org/10.1017/rmu.2017.10 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Among the many recent monographs and critical studies advancing the field in the Anglophone world, four of the new millennium (two written by contributors to this volume) seem landmark: those of Schiesaro (*The Passions in Play*: Cambridge, 2003), Littlewood (*Self-Representation and Illusion in Senecan Tragedy*: Oxford, 2004), Trinacty (*Senecan Tragedy and the Reception of Augustan Poetry*: New York, 2014) and Slaney (*The Senecan Aesthetic: A Performance History*: Oxford, 2016). To which I add as a fifth the seminal essays on Senecan tragedy in the collection edited by Fitch (*Oxford Readings in Classical Studies—Seneca*: Oxford, 2008). Other collections, too, have appeared, including several 'Companions', and two notable biographies (Romm, Wilson, both appearing in the same year: 2014). All testify to the current strength and vitality of Senecan tragic studies.

One topic has particularly engaged contemporary critics and scholars: intertextuality, the verbal interplay between individual Senecan tragic texts and both the texts of Seneca's predecessors, contemporaries and successors and other texts (tragic and non-tragic) of Seneca himself. It is a topic of which Eliot, who examined so incisively the dialogue between the individual and tradition, might have approved. The recent focus, however, has not been on 'anxiety of influence' and even less on *Quellenforschung*, but on semiotic enrichment and creative appropriation. Trinacty (2014, 57f.), for example, rightly notes the repetition of Virgil's Messianic *ultima… uenit…aetas* ('The final age has come', *Ecl.* 4.4) at the end of *Thyestes*' 'Star Chorus' (*in nos aetas ultima uenit*? 'On us has the final age come?' *Thy.* 878). The repetition clearly fits into the Senecan category of 'words already prepared, which arranged differently have a new look' *(parata uerba…quae aliter instructa nouam faciem habent*, *Ep.* 79.6). But Trinacty sees it not simply as 'influence' (anxious or otherwise) nor even as *imitatio* or *aemulatio,* but as ironic allusion designed to bring to the audience's mind the cosmic 'optimism' of *Eclogue* 4 in order to shatter it.

Inevitably in a volume devoted to the poetics of Senecan tragedy intertextual and intratextual analyses loom large—from Sampson's examination of Senecan beginnings to Trinacty's of Senecan endings; but the larger intellectual issues which textual relationships frame, enhance and develop are never forgotten. Stephen Hinds (1993) promoted the idea of Medea as 'intertextual heroine', but the essayists of the present volume go beyond inter- and intra-textuality *per se* and their bearing on literary rivalry and poetic structure; they are concerned with a larger and more dynamic interplay between ideas and relationships between and within texts. Thus Sampson's discussion of the prologue to *Hercules Furens* presents intertextuality as 'normalizing' madness and disorder; Ginsberg's exploration of *Phoenissae*'s incest motif unveils its imbrication with civil war; Littlewood's analysis of *Hercules Furens* underpins an exegesis of the Senecan 'sublime'; Trinacty's unpacking of Senecan closure finds 'a retrospective reading technique' implied in the texts and interpretive openness in the texts themselves. Even a head-on confrontation with the well-worn intertextual phenomenon of *contaminatio* gives rise in DeBrohun's study of *Oedipus* to an

https://doi.org/10.1017/rmu.2017.10 Published online by Cambridge University Press

emphasis on innovation, irony, spectacle and metatheatre. Gunderson's investigation of repetition in two Senecan plays, *Agamemnon* and *Oedipus*, similarly transcends formalism, proceeding beyond allusivity to a self-conscious literary 'belatedness', which exposes the 'secretly unfamiliar' within the familiar and makes the dramas themselves 'a site at which something is felt'. Literary self-consciousness, especially generic self-consciousness, a prominent feature of these essays and of current scholarship on ancient literature, is given emphasis also in Cowan's study of Senecan drama's engagement with satire—more precisely, with the satiric idea of tragedy.

On Seneca's engagement with Stoicism, an area of earlier scholarship on which much critical ink has been spilled, this volume has little to say, although its focus on Senecan intertextuality could easily be expanded to the prose works and to this issue. Indeed the editors may well be thought to intimate this in their introduction, when they echo the current consensus that Stoic philosophy is 'refracted' throughout the plays. Such refraction might suggest (though it might not—this is ever contested) that the relationship between the Stoicism of the plays and the prose works is metaphilosophical, a commentary on the problematics of Stoicism itself. This is a question still awaiting detailed exegesis, but for such exegesis to convince it will need to be based to a substantial degree on the kind of examination of intertextual relations which this volume's essays exemplify.

Senecan tragedy is not simply dramatic speech but dramatic verse, and the editors are quick to draw attention to Senecan metrics, noting that a 'change of meter' and of 'musical form represents anew the interplay between characters and ideas onstage'. Their observation is astute and in accord with recent, ambitious work on Roman metre (see e.g. Morgan 2010), which has attempted to examine the whole problem of the semiotics of metrical form. This is a most difficult subject, on which much work needs to be done, but it is worth noting sensitivity to this issue as a hallmark of the collection. Worth noting, too, is the nuanced approach to rhetoric and dramatic language. The critical climate in which Seneca's tragedies could *acceptably* be reduced to 'exercises in declamatory drama' (Costa 1974, 11) is long gone. Rather Seneca's rhetoric is linked by the editors not only to 'self-characterization' and 'dramatic momentum' but to the creation of a forum 'for scrutinizing the language that characters use to define themselves, their action and their world'. Throughout the volume Seneca's dramatic language is analyzed rigorously as ideologically and semiotically complex, inter-/intratextually resonant and purposefully structured.

The essay by Braund addresses another contemporary concern: classical reception. This is an area where a great deal of intelligent work has been done in recent years on a variety of canonic ancient authors, including Seneca *tragicus*. The impressive study, for example, of Slaney (2016), cited above, attempts to trace a Senecan 'aesthetic' or Senecan 'hypertragedy' through several key European dramatic works from the sixteenth to the twentieth century. She investigates dramatists as diverse as Gager, Garnier, Hardy, Marlowe, Shakespeare, Corneille,

https://doi.org/10.1017/rmu.2017.10 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Racine, Crowne, Lee, Glover, Shelley, and Ted Hughes (to name but some of the authors discussed) to argue for this 'aesthetic', which she sees as defined by nine properties: rhetoric, excess, metatheatre, delirium, possession, abjection, horror, confinement and sympatheia. Braund focuses her study of Senecan reception on two plays, Garnier's *Antigone ou la Piété* and Dryden and Lee's *Oedipus,* drawing attention to their predilection for spectacle and to *contaminatio* not only of Seneca but of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Statius. She perceives several Senecan debts, particularly (in the case of Garnier) the extensive adaptation of passages, figures, vocabulary and tableaux from *Phoenissae* and *Oedipus*, and (in the case of Dryden and Lee) the borrowing of some thematic concerns of *Oedipus* and its horror and spectacle. Such comparative examination of sixteenth and seventeenth century Senecanism is in line with existing and current research, including Slaney's and my own (2011, xciii-civ), and it is to be hoped that Braund's analysis will stir others to take this further. For this is an area of almost infinite possibility. The relationship of Senecan tragedy to European opera alone could form the topic of several books—as could the influence of Senecan tragedy on writers even before the European Renaissance, including antiquity itself. One monograph needs writing immediately and well: the impact of Senecan tragedy (and not simply *Oedipus* and *Phoenissae*) on Statius' *Thebaid*.[1]

A distinctive aspect of Slaney's work is its concern not simply with the reception of Senecan drama but with its performance reception. Analysis of Senecan tragedy as a set of texts sometimes leads to the erasure of its status as a set of dramatic scripts. It is fifty years since the publication of Zwierlein's *Die Rezitationsdramen Senecas* (Meisenheim am Glan, 1966), and, despite the multitude of persuasive arguments levelled against its main thesis of the unperformability of Senecan drama, many contemporary scholars, racked by Senecan *dubitatio,* adopt a kind of intellectual neutrality on the issue similar to that expressed most quotably by Harry Hine (2000, 42): 'In the debate about staging neither side can deliver a knock-out blow to the other.' Hine's words are cited by the editors of this volume, even though the editors articulate the view that 'as tragedies, they were written for performance, whether real or imagined in the mind of the reader'. Similarly Hine himself (p.10) maintains that Romans of the first century CE 'regarded all tragedies, including Seneca's, as in principle suitable for stage performance'. Harrison's edited collection on *Seneca in Performance* (London, 2000), published in the same year as Hine's *Medea*, shows clearly what the plethora of performances of Senecan tragedy in the new millennium has also indexed: that the pendulum has swung away from the recitation/reading hypothesis to Senecan tragedy as performance texts. Such texts would

1. A recent article on the topic may be cited: Augoustakis (2015). The monograph awaits its author. On the larger issue of the contemporary concern with Senecan reception, note that even 'Companions' are following the 'reception trend': see, for example, Dodson-Robinson (2016), one of several Brill 'Companions' to the reception of classical authors.

https://doi.org/10.1017/rmu.2017.10 Published online by Cambridge University Press

also have circulated for reading, even for recitation, but were 'written' as the present editors write, 'for performance'—whether the performance envisaged was in the theatre or in a private house (*intra domum*) to a coterie audience, or both.[2] Indeed it was partly on the grounds of representational power (*rappresentatione*), i.e. theatrical effectiveness,[3] that Giraldi Cinthio, a practical dramatist of the Italian *cinquecento* who 'never for a moment imagined that Seneca did not write for a stage performance',[4] preferred Seneca to the Greeks.

Certain imperatives follow. Chief among them is greater boldness in engaging with Seneca's texts as scripts for performance. Recently attention has been given to Senecan tragedy's relationship to other performance modes, such as mime and pantomime, and its possible deployment of techniques derived from those genres.[5] And for at least two decades now Senecan metatheatricality (itself but one aspect of his self-conscious and self-referential *oeuvre*) has been an area of sustained critical concern: DeBrohun's essay in this volume is a prime instance of that. But Senecan dramaturgy still remains under-researched. The shaping of dramatic action, the blocking of scenes and acts, the disposition of roles, the handling of actors and of the chorus, the interrelationship between the choral odes and acts, the use of ghosts, messengers, mutes, the dramatic and thematic use of stage-setting and props, the employment of implicit stage directions in the text itself (particularly entrance and exit cues, random but more substantial than often noted, identification cues, and implicit directions for stage business), the manipulation of pace, time, movement, space, violence, spectacle and closure—are some of the topics requiring further sustained attention.[6]

The blocking of scenes, for example, affects and effects dramatic interpretation. Does Calchas witness the *agon* between Pyrrhus and Agamemnon in *Troades* Act II or is he offstage throughout it? How in Act IV of that play is Helen to be directed in respect of her relationship to Hecuba? Is the Chorus on stage in the first scene of Act III of *Thyestes*? When does Jocasta enter Act I of *Oedipus*? How is the great 'Processional Ode' of *Medea* to be presented and are Jason and Creusa and/or Medea on stage during it? Such questions are almost countless and every director or dramaturge has to answer them, i.e. has to interpret each scene theatrically. Dramaturgical decisions are interpretive decisions with both aesthetic and semiotic ramifications. If, at the dramaturge's urging on the basis of the Senecan script, the actor playing the King of Thebes

2. For dramatic performances in a private house, a phenomenon even in Marius' day, see Sall. *Iug.* 85.13.

3. Crocetti (1973), 184.

4. Charlton (1946), lxxx n.6. The last sentence and a half of this paragraph reuse (with slight alteration) the language of my *Tragic Seneca* (1997), 12.

5. Pantomime, most especially: see Zimmermann (2008), Slaney (2013), Zanobi (2014).

6. Again I reuse with slight alteration the language of *Tragic Seneca* (1997): see 11f. Sutton's much cited (but all too brief) study (1986) and Harrison's collection (2000) are useful starting-points for dramaturgical inquiry. They need a worthy and more substantial successor, *nescio quid…maius et solito amplius / supraque fines moris humani* ('something greater, larger / than the norm, beyond bounds of human custom', *Thy.* 267f.), as Atreus might say.

https://doi.org/10.1017/rmu.2017.10 Published online by Cambridge University Press

prostrates himself in prayer during the first act of *Oedipus* (71-81), stands upright before his 'mother' and throughout the body of the play until the final act when he sustains himself with a stick, he performs before the audience the riddle of the Sphinx (see Boyle 2011, 128f.). The coronation of Thyestes at the end of *Thyestes* Act III partly instantiates, partly critiques the universal reflections of the Chorus which follow (*Thy*. 596-606)—all can be underscored in the staging. A direction to the actor playing Jocasta to position his/her 'incestuous' body between the two sons in the final section of unfinished *Phoenissae* transforms the play's fusion of incest and civil war into theatrical spectacle (see Ginsberg's illuminating comments earlier in this volume). Sometimes lines (e.g. *Med*. 978-81, *Thy*. 999-1004) may be considered primarily dramaturgical in function—spoken to provide time for offstage action to be performed.

Pace, tone, pauses effect meaning. Dialogue involving *stichomythia* and/or *antilabe* can be played in different ways with different dramatic consequences. A pause, for example, before Phaedra utters *quod uiuo*, 'That I live', in answer to Theseus' demand for the 'sin', *delictum*, to be purged by death (*Pha*. 879-80), gives both dramatic and thematic power to Phaedra's three syllables. Similarly, as Calder observed four decades ago (1976/77, 8-10), a pause before the Courtier's *fides*, 'trust', the last word of the last line of *Thyestes* Act II and one underscored by epanadiplosis—

> ista nostro in pectore
> fides timorque sed magis claudet fides.
>
> (Sen. *Thy*. 334f.)

> Trust and fear
> Will lock them in my heart, but mainly—trust.

—signals to the audience not only that *fides* was spoken and *timor* was meant, but also that such is the discourse of tyranny.

Some of the most controversial lines of Senecan tragedy merit dramaturgical discussion. It would be worthwhile, for example, to add a dramaturgical element to Cowan's and Trinacty's acute discussions above of Oedipus' famous/infamous self-exhortation:

> i profuge uade siste—ne in matrem incidas.
>
> (Sen. *Oed*. 1051)

> Go, flee, away, stop. Don't stumble—on your mother.

What happens to this line if the imperatives are spoken quickly and there is a pause after *siste* (as Oedipus 'stops') and after *n*(*e*) *in matr*(*em*), followed by *incidas* with its cutting *c*? The line is startling and ironic but perhaps not 'macabre'; and, if there is a pause after *in matrem*, complex in its signification

https://doi.org/10.1017/rmu.2017.10 Published online by Cambridge University Press

(rather than confusing)—with the sexual sense of *incidas* coming to the fore, even as the word recalls not only Oedipus' 'stumbling on a kingdom' (*in regnum incidi*, *Oed*. 14) in the play's opening act but also (see Trinacty above) the 'stumbling' of the hunter Arcas 'on his mother', Callisto, in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (*incidit in matrem*, 2.500). In earlier comments on this notorious line (2011, 358), I discussed another passage concerned with the violation of the dead which has caused similarly unnecessary consternation, viz. the speech of Thyestes, when he refuses to batter his own body lest he strike his consumed sons: *sustine, infelix*, *manum*, / *parcamus umbris*, 'wretch, hold your hand, / Let's spare the dead' (*Thy*. 1046f.). Critics talk in each case of 'misplaced cleverness' (e.g. Tarrant *ad Thy*. 1046.) or bathos (e.g., Frank *ad Pho*. 62). Such lines, I argued, need not be played as inappropriately clever or bathetic. They may be played—and are the more powerful for being so played—as sardonic (dark wit appealed to the Romans as it did to the Elizabethans and Jacobeans) *and* deeply tragic. There is no contradiction here: think of the Shakespearean Titus' controversial laughter (*Tit. Andr*. III.i.265). Negative interpretations of Senecan language (see Coffey and Mayer 1990 *ad Pha*. 1267) often smack of the study, and appear less persuasive when performance is envisaged.

A future collection of Senecan essays might well engage in detail with dramaturgical issues (perhaps with contributions from both scholars and theatre directors). A recent monograph by Kohn (*The Dramaturgy of Senecan Tragedy*: Ann Arbor, 2013) and the collection edited by Harrison and Liapis (*Performance in Greek and Roman Theatre*: Leiden, 2013) raised hopes, but disappointed. Ginsberg's essay in this volume shows some of what is possible. The issue is pressing, because one of the welcome consequences of the resurgence of critical interest in Senecan tragedy has been the restoration of the plays to many institutional syllabuses. Seneca *tragicus* is now widely studied throughout the college and university system. He is also now widely performed. Take *Thyestes*, for example. The twenty-first century has witnessed productions (sometimes operatic)[7] of a *Thyestes* in Germany (Mannheim, Stuttgart), Belgium (Brussels), Italy (Rome, Ascea, Verona, Milan), Greece (Athens), England (Cambridge, London), France (Paris), Australia (Melbourne, Sydney), Canada (Montreal), USA (Chicago, Los Angeles, New York), and, without doubt, in other countries and cities, too—just as it has witnessed frequent performances of *Thyestes*' most famous progeny, *Titus Andronicus*. For theatre-goers in the UK the Polly Findlay production of *Thyestes* (in the Caryl Churchill translation: London, 1998) at the Arcola Theatre, London, in June 2009, seems to have been unusually successful, receiving fulsome accolades from the British press, who credited the director with tracing

7. Two major new operas have been staged in the new millennium. Sylvano Bussotti's 'tragedia operistica', *Tieste,* premiered at the Teatro Brancaccio Rome, June 8 2000, conducted by Arturo Tamayo. Jan van Vlijmen's *Thyeste*, based upon Hugo Claus' adaptation, premiered in Brussels at the Théâtre Royal de la Monnaie on September 27 2005; it was directed by Gerardjan Rijnders and conducted by Stefan Asbury.

https://doi.org/10.1017/rmu.2017.10 Published online by Cambridge University Press

a line from Seneca to the revenge-films of Quentin Tarantino. Also noteworthy was a stirring performance (directed by Claire Catenaccio and with original music by Kate Meng Brassel) of Seneca's *Thyestes* in Latin by faculty and students of Columbia University in the Minor Latham Theatre New York, April 2013 (recently available online).[8]

Seneca's modern, indeed postmodern, appeal is not difficult to explain. His focus on appetite and lust, violence and horror, rhetoric, morality and power, his concern with the psychology of guilt, fear and reason, with the problematics of kinship, with the ethics and limits of power, with political, social and religious institutions and their fragility and impotence, his dramatization of reason's failure, the triumph and cyclicity of evil, the order of fate and history, his theatricalized universe—speak pointedly to our times. Contrary to the situation which framed the first *Ramus* volume on Senecan tragedy, the present volume is published in a context where Seneca *tragicus* flourishes not only critically but dramatically, where the word in which Eliot affirmed Senecan drama to reside is performed and experienced as living theatrical, spectatorial reality on a stage.

University of Southern California
aboyle@usc.edu

8. Readers interested in the long history of *Thyestes*' reception (from antiquity to the present day) may find a detailed account in the Introduction (§ viii) to my *Seneca: Thyestes* (Oxford, 2017), from the Preface and Introduction to which some of the language and material in the final two paragraphs of this postscript have been taken.

https://doi.org/10.1017/rmu.2017.10 Published online by Cambridge University Press