

Seneca the Younger and Neronian Aesthetics

Seneca's tragedies are at such apparent variance with his philosophical prose works that the question whether Seneca Tragicus and Seneca Philosophus are one and the same continues to be raised to this day (Kohn 2002-2003); indeed, the tragedies align much more easily with the two other great creative products of the Neronian era, Lucan's *Bellum Civile* and Petronius's *Satyricon*, than with the overtly Stoic tone of most of Seneca's prose works. In Seneca Tragicus, one finds the same taste for the grotesque as in Lucan and Petronius; examples from the latter authors are so numerous that they can be drawn virtually at random: Lucan's description of Erictho excavating the eyeballs from the corpse with her nails recalls the self-blinding of Oedipus (*immergitque manus oculis gaudetque gelatos / effodisse orbis et siccae pallida rodit / excrementa manus*, *BC* 6.541-543; cf. *evolvit orbis*, *Oed.* 967, and *effossis oculis*, *Oed.* 973-974), and the relish with which Lucan details the effects of the *seps*'s bite on Sabellus (*BC* 9.762-788) is equally at home in his uncle's aesthetic universe. Much the same sensibility converts hedonism into disgust in the *Satyricon*, most vividly represented by the repellent Trimalchio and his overwrought cuisine. The underworld imagery in the *Cena Trimalchionis* has frequently been remarked; when that episode culminates in Trimalchio's pretended funeral, hell and earth become, as in Senecan drama, impossible to tell apart.

It is, however, only the anti-Stoic stance of Seneca Tragicus that Seneca Philosophus contradicts: in aesthetic terms, Seneca Philosophus breaks radically from the traditional canons, enough to provoke the censure of Quintilian a generation later (*Inst. Or.* 10.1.125-131) in terms strongly reminiscent of Seneca's own remarks on decadence in *Ep.* 114. If Fitch (1981) is right in suggesting that Seneca's tragedies antedate his prose *oeuvre* and that some of them date from the reign of Claudius, then Letter 114 describes the Senecan poetic program not only in reverse, but retrospectively. This paper will explore the possibility, raised by the foregoing considerations, that Seneca not only exemplified, but pioneered, the aesthetics of the Neronian age.

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